

CHAPTER 4

THE HARM IN HARMONY

or

BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER

A/N: Guess what, readers? That's right—it's *length inflation!* Each chapter in this series is turning out longer than the last, which makes the prospect of writing the final chapter somewhat daunting. ;-)) Sure, you can see this as inconsistency, but you may be happier thinking of it as all the more story to love.

I know a number of you didn't care too much for Chapter 3, or at least parts of it. I don't blame you. It was strange, and the relationships were unorthodox, especially seen through Rainbow's unsettled eyes. But I liked it. :-)) Anyway, I wanted to warn you—this chapter has a [Somewhat Sad] tag. There will be tears, and I can't guarantee that everypony ends up happy. My objective, after all, is to dish up something a little different every time.

I hope you like it. Please comment!

P.S. In response to reader demand, I've added a bonus scene! It's a flashback at the end of section 10, about halfway through the document. Because everyone needs more Apple Pie in their lives!

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#10: RT—Redefining Aristocracy

The main room was bubbling with the babbling of dozens of ponies, which to Pinkie's mind made the perfect backdrop for a little back-hallway zaniness. "...All right. First you say a word, and then I say a word, and then you say *another* word, and I say another word, and then you say another—"

"Pinkie!!!"

Apparently Twilight didn't quite grasp the rules yet. "That sounded like a whole sentence, silly! You can't start out with an entire sentence! Then I don't even get a turn!"

Twilight glanced momentarily toward the hallway's exit. "So...we keep going until we reach the end of a sentence?"

"Yep!" chirped Pinkie.

"And...what exactly are we hoping to accomplish?"

Such a typical Twilight question. "Fuuunn!" Pinkie admonished, splaying her legs a bit.

"So you're saying...that it's fun to generate random sentences?"

Pinkie felt her mane puff out. "It's not random! It depends on *both* of us! It's like how a spirit board works, only without the board!"

"And without spirits," added Twilight.

"*Most* of the time," Pinkie replied. "But I could tell you stories!! Honestly, it's only half random, at most!"

"So it's stochastic," said Twilight.

How did Twilight always manage to bring these big words into everything?

"Stow-what's-kick?"

"Stochastic!" Twilight started to walk and lecture in that funny way she did sometimes. "A 'stochastic' process is one that depends on a random variable. It may unfold according to the rules of science and logic, but it has randomness at its core!"

Pinkie crept alongside with long steps. "Sounds like you and me!"

Twilight gave her a stern look. "I am *not* the hard crunchy coating to your chewy bubblegum center," she insisted.

"No, of course not, silly! That's Jackie! But you've gotta admit, you are always trying to squееeeze as much sense out of innocent little random things as you possibly can!" She pantomimed wringing the neck of an inexplicable concept.

Twilight glanced out the door again, and then turned back to Pinkie and stamped. "Fine. Let's do this. I start with a word?"

Pinkie nodded. Hooray!

"Probability," Twilight said.

"Cupcakes!" exclaimed Pinkie.

Twilight narrowed her eyes. "Probability cupcakes?"

"That's *two* words, Twilight!"

"But...what are probability cupcakes??"

"How should I know? They must be waveform-flavored or something. It doesn't matter!"

Twilight stared, but continued. "Are."

"Cupcakes!" said Pinkie, smiling.

Twilight blinked. "...That..." she tried.

"Cupcakes!" said Pinkie. This was just too easy!

Twilight glared, her eyes growing red. "Are you going to say anything but 'cupcakes'?!"

Pinkie shrugged. "I say whatever comes into my head!"

"But it doesn't make any sense! What good is this game if the sentences don't make any sense?!"

"That sounds like a challenge!" Pinkie leapt in place, hair bobbing wildly. "Are you challenging my word?"

Twilight's lip curled. "...I guess?"

Newbies! Pinkie cleared her throat and recited cheerfully: "'Probability cupcakes are cupcakes that cupcakes of a more normal persuasion have never learned to tolerate, perhaps because they tend to collapse spontaneously while baking in the oven!' Now you just try and tell me that doesn't make any sense!"

Twilight stood, mouth agape. "It--that--all right, I admit that does make a certain amount of sense. Does this mean you win?"

Pinkie laughed. "Oh, silly. There's no winning in this game! ...But yes." With that, she zipped off, sensing that the moment was right for a comic exit. Twilight was stuck in the back hallway until showtime, but the party was finally starting to swing into gear! Pinkie had party games to play! Mayhem to sow! Inhibitions to dissolve! Balloons to—

"Pinkie Pie!!"

Again? Pinkie skidded to a halt in mid-bounce, plopping to the floor. This time it was Rarity yelling at her, and the unicorn, clad in an ultramarine sheath evening gown, looked upset.

"What's the matter, Rarity?"

"I hate to be rude, Pinkie, but have you forgotten the pretext by which we got you invited to this affair? I know you have punch boiling in your veins, but you're here to *cater!* Not to cavort about!"

"I know," Pinkie mourned. "And we whipped up a whole bunch of neat stuff to serve! But I'm not in my natural element if I'm cooped up behind a serving table! Can't I just stuff it all into a big piñata and give everyone a giant ladle or something?"

"As...amusing as that thought is, I'm afraid not. This is no casual shindig, Pinkie—this is Princess Celestia's *birthday!* It demands propriety!"

"We could fill the piñata with propriety!" suggested Pinkie. "Unless that's an abstract concept, or something. But even then!"

Rarity's horn glowed, and Pinkie found herself being tugged toward her assigned place by her red bow tie cravat. "Back to the table, Pinkie."

Pinkie sighed. She'd tried! She trudged back to her table and listlessly stirred her apple geode soup with a long ladle she'd much rather have been using to whack a piñata. "Hey Rarity?" she asked. "Why do rich and fancy ponies always make having fun so *difficult?*"

"Why, Pinkie!" exclaimed the socialite. "Do you imagine that success ought to be all fun and games? I am sorry to inform you, dear, that rubbing fetlocks in high society is hard work! Otherwise, what would it *mean!?*"

"What would what mean?" asked Pinkie. "Success?"

"Precisely! If we didn't have to labor for our reputations, what would be the point of having them? It's all very well to have boundless fun at a friendly party at home, Pinkie...but in high society, every ounce of fun must be *earned!*"

This was actually starting to make sense. "Oh! Maybe *that's* why I have so much trouble with parties like these!" Pinkie exclaimed. "Earning something sounds a lot like give and take. But when it comes to me and fun, I prefer to *give and get!*" To illustrate her point, Pinkie dished out a bowl of soup to the fellow caterer just arriving at the table next to hers, a diminutive blue mare who smiled in surprise and offered Pinkie a slice of fresh focaccia in return.

Rarity seemed charmed by this exchange. "Perhaps you're right," she conceded. "Perhaps we shouldn't have to earn our popularity. But Pinkie, it's simply too enjoyable *not* to! Twilight and I are always up for a challenge, after all!"

"Well, you've certainly done a good job so far! I mean, you've done cast parties on Bridlewalk...that bash for Sapphire Shores' sister...the Manehattan casino circuit...and now Celestia's birthday!"

Rarity chuckled. "Oh, but this was easy, Pinkie! Twilight goes back a *long* way with the princess, as you know. She had only to ask for an invitation!"

"Even so!" pressed Pinkie. "It's funny to think how I used to want to go to all the biggest and best parties in Equestria, but now you and Twilight are getting to live my dream! I mean, *Twilight!* When I met her, she couldn't tell a party from a parsnip! I actually checked! I gave her a parsnip and said, 'Hey, do you want this delicious party?' and she just sort of stared at me so I knew she'd fallen for it!"

Rarity laughed her high little laugh. "You aren't jealous, are you, Pinkie? You know I care a great deal for our friendship—I'd hate to let success come between us."

Pinkie winked cutely. "No worries! I *used* to wish I could go to all those parties, but when the Grand Galloping Gala was such a letdown, I realized that it's not how big or famous a party is that makes it great. It's how many cookies there are!! And a jillion other things too, of course, but no, Rarity, I'm not jealous. I can make great parties happen on my own."

Rarity tossed her mane. "Indeed! I'm very relieved to hear that, Pinkie. Still, dropping your name for caterer was the least I could do!" She glanced toward the back hallway, where Twilight was beckoning. "Oh—it looks like we're on! Enjoy the show, Pinkie!"

"Later!"

As Rarity hurried off, Pinkie turned her attention to the yellow-haired blue earth pony who'd given her the focaccia. "So you're the savory caterer, huh?"

The little mare let out a single chuckle. "Beg your pardon?"

Pinkie pointed to their respective collections of dishes, laid out along the long tables. "You're the savory caterer, and I'm the sweet one! That's why they wanted two of us! I'm Pinkie Pie." She offered a hoof.

"Juniper." The meek caterer met Pinkie's hoof with her own, completing the gesture. "It's true, I was told I wouldn't have to worry about desserts. I guess they're a specialty of yours?"

Pinkie slurped up a generous ladleful of geode soup. "You could say that! I do a lot with apples these days, though!"

Juniper craned her neck to examine Pinkie's table. "So I see! Looks like you've got apple tarts, apple spice cakes...apple crumble, apple cobbler..."

"Pear cobbler, actually! But yep, it's mostly apples." She lifted a boiled, peeled apple from the soup pot. "I invented a way to suck the core out of an apple and stuff it with candy! So I call them 'geodes' and they're really popular. Go on, try

yours!"

As dinner wasn't for a while, the two caterers sampled each other's wares, having little else to do in the meantime. "Amazing," said Juniper. "How *do* you core the apples without cutting them open?"

Pinkie's mane bounced. "Iit's a seeecret!"

The blue mare smiled shyly. "Well then, tell me this—who was that unicorn you were talking to earlier?"

"Huh? Oh, that's Rarity Starspinner! But I knew her back when she was just Rarity. We went to school together in Hoofington, and now we both live in Ponyville!"

"Is she a performer of some kind?"

"Kinda!" Pinkie waved a hoof equivocally. "She's more of a social big shot. Oh hey—you're about to find out!" Sure enough, the royal herald had appeared and sparking silver flecks filled the upper air, garnering everypony's attention.

"Fillies and gentlecolts," cried the herald. "I'm having a *splendid* time! Can you say the same?!"

Pinkie and Juniper locked smiles for a moment as they joined the room of partygoers in clomping their forehooves against the floor.

The herald gestured toward the back hallway. "I give you...*Rarity Starspinner and Twilight Sparkle!*"

While the applause continued, a flourish of harp music sounded from the hallway, accompanied by lavishly flowing pink and purple ribbons of light. In stepped Rarity, her evening gown now embellished with a striped mulberry kimono, some sections of which were sheer enough to let the purple show through. She wore a light blue obi and a diamond-shaped silver pin, and through her obi was thrust a parasol depicting wispy clouds on an idyllic day. She raised a hoof and waved daintily to the crowd, lips curled in a tart smile.

She was followed by Twilight, whose orange tunic and yellow-tangerine grass skirt were accented by her own parasol, which depicted a twilight sun framed by searing parhelia above a dark landscape. Twilight's wave and smile were far more innocent—the contrast made the crowd laugh, Pinkie included.

"My friends!!" announced Twilight to the room at large. The two of them were not on a stage or even a platform—they were right there in the room with everyone else, which Pinkie knew was how they always operated. "Friends and neighbors! It's great to be back in Canterlot—the city where I grew up!"

The cheers had died down, but this gave them a new lease. Rarity didn't wait for silence. She lowered herself to all fours and lifted her head high. "Why, yes! Twilight uses that friends and neighbors line at every show, folks, but tonight she may actually *recognize* a few!"

"I do, actually!" Twilight turned from face to face. "There's Mr. Shimmerseal, the telescope maker!" An old silver stallion acknowledged the crowd's light applause. "And Captain Ragnar of the Guard—I used to live up the block from him, in fact, and let me tell you—he treated his family like one of his regiments!" The tawny off-duty guard stallion laughed along with the crowd.

"Well, then the neighbors are covered!" crooned Rarity. "As for friends—believe me, Twilight Sparkle knows a thing or two about friendship."

"Well, I did write a dissertation on the subject," admitted Twilight with mock-humility, earning more laughs.

"She certainly did!" agreed Rarity. "And Twilight was no slouch at putting her ideas into practice, either! Her dissertation was quite a hefty volume—I believe her typical tactic was to drop it on somepony's head, and invite them in for aspirin while they recovered!"

"You have to admit," said Twilight, "I did refine my methods over time."

"True enough," her partner conceded. "Once she got to know somepony, she would tailor her book selection to their personality. Our friend Rainbow Dash, for example—a speed racer—might find herself conked unconscious by a copy of *The Fast and the Flurrious!*"

Of course, Pinkie knew Twilight had never dropped a book on anypony's head in her life—not deliberately, anyway! But she laughed with the crowd just the same.

Twilight now turned to face the screened balcony from which the room knew Princess Celestia was watching. "Well, if anypony's to blame, it's the one who assigned my dissertation in the first place—none other than Princess Celestia!" Now the crowd's hoots subsided to sounds of reverence.

"Ah yes, Celestia!" replied Rarity. "Guardian of the Realm!"

"Keeper of the Day," added Twilight, starting to twirl her parasol.

"Disperser of Discord!" cried Rarity, twirling hers as well.

"Unifier of the Thirty-Two Queendoms!" praised Twilight.

"Thirty-eight!" corrected Rarity.

"Well, they all got unified anyway, so let's just call it an even forty," suggested

Twilight, earning more chuckles. "And let's not forget her most important title of all...Oldest Troll!"

Rarity gasped, mortified. "*Senior Troll!*"

"Senior anything, really," said Twilight.

"You do have a point," Rarity conceded. "And of course, Ruler of Equestria and Princess of the Sun."

"I knew I was forgetting something!" acknowledged Twilight. "We are gathered here today to honor Celestia for her eight zillionth birthday—may she see zillions and zillions more!"

Rarity frowned. "You realize, of course, Twilight, that 'zillion' is not a proper number?"

Twilight nodded solemnly. "That's just how transcendent she is! She was done with ordinary numbers ages ago. As I understand it, she once celebrated her seven thousand, nine hundred ninety-ninth birthday for a million years straight!"

Rarity feigned astonishment, her parasol flying back. "What are the odds?"

"I could tell you," replied Twilight, "but then I'd have to whack you with a math book."

The patter continued for a while, and then the show turned to fashion. Rarity made a disparaging remark about Twilight's skirt, and Twilight responded with fake indignation. Rarity magnanimously offered to upgrade her partner's ensemble, and Twilight reluctantly accepted, sitting down for her public 'redressal and upbraiding'.

As the act continued, Pinkie found herself amazed at how far Twilight had come. Just two years ago, the purple bookworm had been inept in front of any crowd without notes to read from. Now, thanks to Rarity, she was practically in her element while performing burlesque! It just went to show how much difference the love of a dedicated partner could make.

A fawning Rarity Starspinner stuffed Twilight into petticoats, gowns, sashes, vests, and anything else she could justify. Finally, Twilight began to fight back. "You know, if this really is all about appearances," she pointed out, "there's no rule the clothes have to be real!"

"Why, Twilight, whatever do you mean?"

"I mean, Rarity, that with a little effort, a talented unicorn could conjure up garments from pure magic, like this!" A periwinkle shawl appeared glowing in midair, clearly illusory, and descended around Rarity's neck and shoulders.

"Are you joking, Twilight? I can't wear *this*! It isn't..." Rarity slipped out and waved a hoof straight through the floating shawl. "It isn't *substantial* enough!"

"And since when has fashion been about substance?" countered Twilight.

"Since *when?!*" snorted an angry Rarity. "*Every three years*, I'll have you know! Plus a leap year every seven fashion cycles!"

Come to think of it, Pinkie was also impressed at how Rarity, once uptight, had grown to the point she was able to make fun of her own profession like this. Of course, Pinkie had helped them develop the comedic side of their act, which made her proud. But the whole gang had blossomed like she wouldn't have *believed* ever since they'd used the Elements of Harmony a second time to defeat Discord. Sure, Rainbow was no longer obsessing over her training, but to be perfectly honest, the Wonderbolts had never really been a feasible dream for her, given that they only recruited to fill openings and had a waiting list twenty ponies long. With the time she was saving, Dash had become a much better weather pony and companion for Fluttershy. And Fluttershy, for her part, was learning medical techniques from Zecora, and was such a good veterinarian now that she helped sick and injured animals from as far away as Trottingham! As for Pinkie and Jackie...well. Pinkie grinned at the thought of all those cruller trees. Really, did anything more need to be said?

The show was careening to its finale now, both unicorns swaddled in at last five layers of clothing, real and illusory, and Rarity had just added a pointed wizard's cap to Twilight's ensemble. "Isn't she so *chic*?" she was asking the audience. "Isn't she just the most adorable magical prodigy you've ever laid eyes on??"

Twilight rose to her feet, accessories clattering to the floor. "I think they've had about as much of us as they can take," she surmised. "How about we close with a poem!"

"An excellent idea, Twilight! Something classical and evocative, perhaps?"

"Oorrrr I could do a limerick!" suggested Twilight. The crowd laughed anew.

"Really," deadpanned Rarity. "Well, it had better not begin, 'There once was a pony called Rarity.'"

"Er..." hemmed Twilight. "What if I recite it backwards?"

Rarity facehoofed and flung off half her clothes in a gesture of pique. "Never mind! Just recite it!"

"Right!" Twilight cleared her throat and faced the crowd:

*"There once was a pony called Rarity
Renowned for the strength of her charity."*

*There is no defense
To her fashion sense
Except to embrace the hilarity!"*

As the crowd laughed, Twilight threw them her wizard's hat and said, "Thank you! Thank you, friends and neighbors!"

"And thank *you*, Twilight, for that lovely tribute. Good night, everypony!" The two performers waved their goodbyes, took their bows, and slipped back into the hallway whence they'd come. Again the air was filled with flowing ribbons and sparkles, and the herald took the floor again.

"Twilight Sparkle and Rarity Starspinner, fillies and gentlecolts! And now...! The court of Equestria will be most obliged if you would all rise, and join us...in a moment of song."

Pinkie whipped her head left and right. Was it time? Was it time?? She spotted a retinue of armored guards entering through a doorway beneath the balcony, and behind them, in full shining majesty, was the princess herself, adorned in her royal sandals and brooch and, in place of her crown, a colorful pointed birthday hat! It was time!

Celestia nodded to her subjects on all sides as they cheered her entrance into the already bustling palace ballroom. Sweeping silver lights dazzled the room and balloons fell from above. A note on a kazoo rang out, and seconds later, the whole assemblage, Pinkie included, erupted into song...

"Happy birthday to you!

"Happy birthday to you!

"Happy birthday dear Celly..." (Well, a lot of the ponies sang her full name, but Pinkie didn't know why when it was so obvious that "Celly" scanned better!)

"Happy birthday toooo yooooooooou!"

Pinkie made sure to end at exactly the same moment as the last other pony singing, so that no one would be left singing alone. But then began the follow-up verse that only actually got sung occasionally, so Pinkie was surprised when participation was so enthusiastic throughout the room:

"How oooollld aaare you?

"How oooollld aaare you?

"How oooollld aaare yoooouuu?

"How oooollld aaare you?"

In response, Celestia tossed her polychromatic mane, gave a wicked grin, and announced, "I'll *never* tell!!" At which the crowd erupted into cheers and boos.

As Celestia seated herself before the cake (a towering original creation Pinkie and Jackie had stayed up well into the night to finish), Pinkie got a familiar vague

feeling that she ought to be paying musical royalties to someone, somewhere. But the presence of actual royalty quickly overshadowed it. Everyone wanted to get close to the princess, to pay their respects! Pinkie, having already met her on several occasions, remained in place, bouncing up and down, but Juniper zipped off to get a quick word in, if she could.

It wasn't two minutes before the lights came on and Celestia, standing where Rarity and Twilight had only minutes before, raised her horn and addressed the room:

"My dear friends...my dear, dear friends..." The princess shook her head as if to clear it of tears that by all rights she shouldn't be crying, after having soooo many birthdays for practice! Then again, maybe that was *why* she was crying!

"Thank you so much for coming...By tradition, I am sometimes personally associated with Equestria. Because of this fact, today is being celebrated in town halls, village squares, and private residences throughout our realm. Each locale has its own traditional celebration—from the rodeos and marches of distant Palamine to the fireworks and endless troughs of Manehattan. But nowhere—nowhere are they celebrating like us! Because you, my wonderful friends, have actually come to celebrate my birthday with *me*—and you can't know how much I appreciate it! I feel so, so lucky to be so beloved." The ruler of Equestria bowed her head in humility.

Then she raised it suddenly. "And can you believe this cake?!?" She gestured to the cake with its massive rings of red, pink and white, the rim of each layer cut with pink candy-coated cookies and wafer-thin apple slices, and the room broke out once again in applause. Pinkie felt herself blushing and grinning simultaneously. She took a bow behind her table, though she doubted anypony but Juniper saw her do it.

But she was seen soon enough! Celestia declared that dinner had begun, and at last it was time for Pinkie and Juniper to start dishing out their comestible delights! So Pinkie got to work. Most guests went to Juniper's table first, but enough elected to start with dessert that Pinkie had her hooves full for the next twenty minutes—a blur of hustling, cutting, spooning, chatting, and delivering her treasury of puddings, cakes, and pastries.

At last, things began to slow down. Something twinged inside Pinkie's brain as a gray, dark-haired mare with a very staid demeanor walked up for an apple brioche. This earthy pony looked a lot like Pinkie's sister Inkie Pie...but as she might have been if Pinkie had never brought joy into her life. This wasn't her sister, but hadn't Pinkie seen her somewhere before?

Oh! Right! "I remember you now!" Pinkie blurted. "You're one of those musicians from the Grand Galloping Gala! You helped me play the Pokey Pony on your cello!"

"Double bass," the earth pony corrected sternly.

"Mmm, nope, I'm pretty sure it's a cello!"

A flinty pair of purple eyes glared across the serving table. "Don't you suppose I can be trusted to know what instrument I play?"

Huh. This pony might look like her sister, but she sure seemed like a Meanie McMeanerpants. Though why the family hadn't changed their name when they'd stopped wearing pants, Pinkie had no idea. "Well I *guess* you probably forgot, because you don't *bow* the double bass! You pluck it, like this!" She mimed plucking the strings of a contrabass, managing to reproduce the tones passably by kicking the nearest table leg in sync with her motions. Pinkie was rather proud of that until a tower of stuffed apples collapsed into an open-faced apple pie.

The haughty musician eyed the resulting mess with an expression that spoke volumes. Pinkie grinned sheepishly and offered an apple-smeared apple to the gray pony.

Sneering, the musician snatched the apple in the crook of her foreleg. "One most certainly *can* bow the double bass," she hissed. "And must, when producing chamber music!"

"Is that so?" asked Pinkie. "Well, I think you're forgetting one thing." She leaned over the table and sang staccato into the musician's face: "There's always room for C-E-L-L...O!"

The musician scoffed and left, leaving Pinkie with that weird urge to pay someone royalties again.

She had other guests to serve, but all the while, her inner gears were turning. What if Pinkie had never experienced her life-changing epiphany as a filly? Her family would never have become the most cheerful rock farmers in the Hoofington metro, and Inkie might have grown up to be as grumpy as that musician. Maybe an orchestral player could afford an attitude like that, but a sculptor like Inkie who specialized in balancing rocks on top of other rocks probably couldn't. Pinkie quietly despaired for what her poor sister might have become, if it hadn't been for that sonic rainboom...

The sonic rainboom. It had led not just to her cutie mark, but to those of all her closest friends, as well. That *couldn't* have been a coincidence! Pinkie grappled with the implications—their destinies really must be intertwined. Which explained not only how they all happened to be perfectly suited to wield Elements of Harmony, but how they were all romantically suited for each other as well. Two unicorns who loved high society, two pegasi who loved the outdoors, two earth ponies who loved baking...It was as if the Elements were watching out for their emotional stability...making sure they didn't end up alone and bitter, like that double cellist....

Something clicked in Pinkie's head. She shuddered. She *really* shuddered. "Ohh

nnnooOooOooOoo!!" screamed Pinkie as she felt herself jackhammering along the table, spinning from side to back to rump to belly without any control, upsetting all her desserts along the way. Apparently she was about to get run over by her own train of thought! At least, that was the only sane interpretation she could make. The one time this had happened before, it had signified a major, painful mental and emotional breakthrough on Twilight's part. A revelation! Pinkie could only assume, as she rattled to the very end of the long table and collapsed onto the floor amid the wreckage of her sweets, that another frightening revelation was on its way.

Stunned ponies stood all around her, staring and muttering and nosing her to see if she was okay. Juniper was trying to get her to stand. Before she could, Pinkie looked up to see Princess Celestia approaching. A feeling of peace cut through the fear. There was a sliver of silver white, and the terrifying touch of Celestia's horn—and then calm. Pinkie rose slowly, the spasms gone, and gazed into the eyes of her princess.

"Pinkie Pie," said the ruler of Equestria. "Are you all right?"

Pinkie shook herself, spraying frosting and crumbs on those nearest to her. "I just had a doozy," she uttered.

"A doozy of a seizure, Pinkie?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Just a doozy!" She lowered her voice. "Somepony's gonna realize something big and scary."

The onlookers murmured and the princess looked apprehensive. "I wonder if Luna was right," she muttered. She bent to whisper in Pinkie's ear. "Do you have any clue what this might be about?"

Pinkie whispered right back. "About the Elements of Harmony. And what they've done!"

Celestia looked no calmer than before. "After the party...can you stay behind? And bring your friends? We should talk."

That wasn't what Pinkie had wanted to hear, but she nodded. "Sorry about all the desserts. I guess I kinda gave a new meaning to 'apple turnover'."

But with a swoosh and flourish of Celestia's head, the mess was cleared, and what desserts remained were restored to order. "It's all right, Pinkie. We still have the cake! Speaking of which..."

Celestia strode through the confused crowd toward the gigantic cake, drawing attention away from Pinkie and her disaster. "Well, my friends, it seems we've had a mishap and lost most of our desserts." She laughed gaily—in the face of a laugh like that, who could possibly stay dismayed? "All the more important for us to cut the cake! But first!"

A team of pegasus ponies in kitchen uniforms fluttered over the massive confection and swiftly inserted a multitude of candles into the top. The one in the center was largest, the others successively smaller in rings around it, as if to indicate that Princess Celestia's age was as indeterminate as the size of the universe. Suddenly, a flash of orange and red soared over the top—it was Philomena, Pinkie realized, and she'd used her flaming feathers to light all the candles at once! The crowd was hushed but for gasps and oohs.

"It's time for me to make a wish!" announced the princess. "What should I wish for?"

There was a miniscule pause, and then everypony was shouting suggestions, trying to drown out the noise of their neighbors. "Free trade with the griffons!" someone yelled. "Stronger sky chariots!" bellowed someone else. "More wishes!" called a smart alek teenager. "More desserts!" shouted someone nearby. Pinkie added her own voice to the cacophony: "Chocolate rain!!"

The princess drew in so much breath that the flames almost went out from her *inhalation*. There was a pregnant pause, and then she exhaled, extinguishing the entire conflagration in an artistic swirl of fire. The assemblage clomped and cheered, and the princess, smiling a secret smile, stepped forward to make the first cut using her horn, in accordance with tradition.

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The two unicorns were in a changing room off the back hallway. Pinkie found them layered in far too many mismatched clothes, laughing and dressing each other with even more! She didn't get the idea they were in there for *changing*. Canoodling was more like it!

"*There* you are! I've been looking everywhere! The party's over and the princesses want to talk to us!"

Both unicorns looked over, eyes wide. "*Pinkie!*" shrieked Rarity. "You're interrupting a very private moment!"

"I am? That's weird!" mused Pinkie. "I thought having *fewer* clothes was sexier. Anyway, we've gotta go see them pronto!"

Twilight struggled to escape a green denim jacket. "What's this about, Pinkie?"

"I'm not sure, but I think it's about the Elements of Harmony!"

Now Twilight's eyes were huge and panic-stricken. "Are you serious? We've got to use them *again?! Who's the villain this time?*"

"No pony! It's the Elements themselves! Come on!"

Pinkie seized the duo by the sleeve of a sweater they were somehow both wearing, leaving them to hurriedly shed their garments as she dragged them through the corridors.

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They sat in a room wider than it was deep, lit only by tall, multicolored candles in the corners. Mobiles of moons, planets and asteroids dangled from the high ceiling. Across the formidable table of stone and lead sat Princess Celestia, her expression far more troubled than a birthday girl's ought to be. To her right sat the deep indigo form of Princess Luna.

"How do you like my meeting room?" asked the younger alicorn. Her voice was meek, but tinged with determination to overcome that fact. "Nice and atmospheric, isn't it? I designed it myself." She looked up to where a mobile of wobbly comets chased each other around an evanescent nebula.

"It's lovely, your majesty," said Twilight with a perfunctory bow, "but why are we here? Is something wrong with the Elements of Harmony?"

Celestia cleared her throat, her horn lending a green-white glow to the somber candlelight. "First of all, I want to stress that there is no danger to any of you. We are here only to talk."

"Well, yes," said Rarity, still straightening her tangled hair, "but to talk about what?"

"About my doozy!" exclaimed Pinkie. "You missed it, but I got all herky-jerky during dinner!"

Twilight shot her a startled glance. "You mean like just before we encountered that hydra, and I realized that your...premonitory abilities don't have to make sense in order to be worth acknowledging?"

"Exactly." Pinkie leveled a suspicious gaze at the princesses. "But I think I may have an idea what this is about!"

"You do? That's good," said Luna.

Pinkie was a little surprised to hear it. "Meaning what?"

Luna leaned forward and shivered, apparently with excitement. "You'll have to forgive me if I'm out of the loop. But Pinkie Pie...is it true that you've become a unit with the keeper of Honesty, Applejack?"

Pinkie nodded enthusiastically. "I love her to pieces! Or more accurately, into one big piece that's the same size and shape as she was before!"

Luna gritted her teeth and turned to the unicorns. "And you...your burlesque routine isn't just an act, is it?"

"Not at all," affirmed Rarity. "We're head over hocks in love with one another."

Celestia spoke up. "It surprised me, I admit, when Twilight gave me the news that you were together! I mean no offense to you, Rarity, but I always expected you would court aristocracy!"

Rarity sniffed. "Why tie myself down to some boorish aristocrat when I can instead...*redefine* aristocracy with my dearest friend?"

"I tend to keep her grounded," said Twilight.

"Precisely. Twilight may have been raised in...privileged circumstances, but she certainly knows humility, and Celestia kn—your majesty knows I need a dose of that from time to time."

"And is that what holds you together?" asked an eager Luna.

"Well, not *merely* that," laughed Rarity. "Let's just say that...while I may know how to keep a divine abode, Twilight Sparkle keeps a heavenly bed!"

Twilight blushed. "I know how to make her happy," she admitted.

Luna blushed as well, to Pinkie's surprise. "And your friends, Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy?"

"Oh, they go back a *long*, long way," reminisced Rarity. "Rainbow has always felt a soft spot for Fluttershy...defending her honor and the like. Yet it wasn't until our run-in with Discord two years ago that they truly became close."

Luna turned abruptly to Pinkie. "And this is what bothers you, isn't it? It all seems too perfect."

Pinkie nodded hesitantly. "Yeah, I guess! But then again, can anything ever be *too* perfect? I mean, they say you can have too much of a good thing, but the way I see it, as soon as you have too much, it turns into a *bad* thing, doesn't it? And some things never seem to turn bad no matter *how* much you have! Like cookies! And parties! And those little chewy candies with the red and green wrappers so that they look like strawberries, only they're crunchy on the outside so they're actually harder than strawberries, except they're also gooey in the middle, so they're actually *softer* than strawberries! But even if there are things you can't have too much of, there are other things—like chocolate milk rain—that are just *too good to be true!* And I guess...I guess that's how it feels with the six of us. Like it's just worked out too perfectly...too perfectly to be true."

"Tell them, sister," said Luna.

Rarity and Twilight glanced at each other, then froze. Princess Celestia didn't look much more comfortable. Yet after a brief hesitation, she spoke.

"Very well. There is a reason the Elements of Harmony have the name they do. Unlike other magical artifacts, they thrive on interpersonal connection—that which makes us feel stronger than the sum of our parts. Luna and I felt it ourselves, when we wielded them."

"We were closer then," said Luna nostalgically.

Celestia nodded. "For those decades, we set our natural differences aside."

"Yet, we reasoned that if we continued to depend on the Elements to maintain our personal harmony, it would...stunt us," continued Luna. "We feared what they would do to us over centuries. So...we broke our links to them, and locked them away."

Celestia turned, teary-eyed, to her sister. "The greatest mistake we ever made."

"We can't play *what if*," shrugged Luna. "I'm back, and I'm healing, and...we just don't know what the alternative was."

"Wait," interjected Twilight. "Are you saying that...the reason we fell in love...all of us...is that the Elements *made* us?"

"Only your hearts know the answer to that, Twilight Sparkle," said Celestia at the same moment that Luna said, "Yes, that's what we're saying."

The three friends exchanged frightened glances.

Pinkie would have found it hard to describe what she was feeling. It was the opposite of twitterpation—a frenzied sort of panic that everything she'd been doing with Jackie for the past year or two was wrong. A huge waste of time. She felt like a gigantic invisible screwdriver was futzing around inside her head. She couldn't control her breathing.

"But that's...that absurd!!" objected Rarity. "Twilight and I were the best of friends almost immediately! Surely we would still have met and bonded and eventually fallen in love were it not for the Elements of Harmony!"

Celestia lowered her head. "I wish I could tell you it were so," she said.

"You should have told us!!" yelled Twilight.

"It seemed so benign," Celestia whispered. "After all, who needs to be warned against happiness and harmony?"

"But...but..." Pinkie stammered. "But what about...what about who we really are?! What about our real selves, not our enchanted, harmonied-up selves? What if we were never meant to fall in love??"

"Meant by whom?" asked Celestia. It was a frightening question to be asked by the mistress of the sun and possibly the most powerful being in the world. What could you say?

"Offer to release them," said Luna.

Celestia looked to her sadly.

"Release us?" asked Twilight, stunned. "Can...can you do that?"

"It is possible," Celestia admitted. "I would only need to find replacements that the Elements would consider acceptable."

"But..." said Rarity.

"It's right," said Luna. "No one should go through life not knowing if their love is true."

"Integrity," whispered Twilight, eyeing the table.

"Equestria would mourn the loss of such noble guardians," Celestia told them. "But she has other noble ponies within her borders. As much as it saddens me...my sister is right. The choice is yours."

Pinkie sat in silence. Her heart was speeding up. Was this the doozy? This had to be the doozy. The fact that her time as the Element of Laughter might soon be over...?

No. That wasn't it. It was the possibility that her love for Jackie wasn't real. *That* was what terrified her. That was what made her want to faint right there at the table.

Well, if that was what she wanted, what was stopping her? Live free. Pinkie passed out, her face hitting stone.

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Pinkie's memories reacted to the cold, sudden feelings of stone and shock. They sifted like lightning bugs through her filters until the one she needed was on top...and it lingered, absorbing the sense of stone and changing it to euphoria....and sunlight.

It was the greatest high Pinkie could remember ever having. And it wasn't from cake or chocolate or helium or fermented berries or anything else like that. It was

from talking! The sun was burning, the sugars in her body were churning, and she'd been talking to Applejack for *over seven hours*.

"...so I guess I had the idea that there was something magic about not cutting or taping the sheets together, just folding and sticking them into each other, like if you cut them with scissors all the origami magic would come pouring out and suddenly you couldn't make anything with them anymore, or maybe you could, but it'd be a whole different kind of thing, and it wouldn't be good for hanging from mobiles anymore, just putting in pop-up books, and those don't work if they're closed. But then I thought, what if I could harness the magic when it gets spilled? Wouldn't that just be amazing?! So there was a period when I would sneak into the classroom after school was out and make tiny little nips with the scissors in all the origami sculptures, and try to catch the energy in baking tins and honeycombs and flypaper and conch shells..."

Thumple-tumble! Down went another treeful of apples into their buckets. "Ya don't say," said Applejack.

"I *do* say!" exclaimed Pinkie. "And here's why...!"

For Pinkie, life was about constantly juggling powerful desires against each other, something her friends didn't always seem to realize. One of these was the desire to talk, endlessly, to her heart's content. Pinkie believed in a lot of big things—that the world's ultimate destiny was to be transformed into a gigantic neverending party; that with enough work, anything could be made to taste and feel good; that everyone and everything in the world was worth making friends with if you had the time and patience to do it...and she fervently believed that if she was allowed to talk long enough, and freely enough, she would eventually arrive at the cosmic truth at the heart of reality. Even if it took a million years to get there, it was worth trying, because the closer you got, the better you felt....

"...and she told us that no matter how hard you try, you can't fold the same piece of paper more than seven times! Well, needless to say, I thought she was CAH-RAAY-ZEE. I mean, does paper run out of foldability? Does it get stiff and hard like a cured saddle or something? Does it go on strike and say, 'I've been folded, spindled and mutilated, but this is just one fold too far!'?? NO! Paper doesn't do any of that! So what's to keep me from just folding and unfolding the same sheet as many times as I want? At least, that's what I thought at the time. But then it turned out she meant you couldn't fold it seven times in a row, *without* unfolding..."

At times, the piston of desire just pushed too hard and snapped Pinkie's tethers, and she threw herself into indulging one of her desires without reservation. This certainly wasn't the first time she'd thrown restraint to the wind and blabbed on for hours without pause, but she was coming to realize there was something special about it just the same. And she knew what it was: This was the first time she'd actually had somepony listen to her!!

Not that Applejack was hanging on her every word, or even paying close attention...but she really was listening! She was setting out buckets, kicking apples from the trees, and nodding now and then, or grunting in agreement, and even interjecting every so often with "Huh!" or "Sure!" or "Well, ah s'pose." More essentially, she hadn't told Pinkie to shut up, even once!

In fact, through her interminable rambling, Pinkie even thought she spied Applejack sporting a furtive smile now and then!

"...a really, really *huge* sheet of paper, and dragged it home, and I got all these candles and set them out and made this huge ceremony out of it, and I got my sister Blinky to help me make the really big folds, and she did it like it was a church service or something with her eyes almost closed, and we were five folds in and I totally thought we were gonna get to at *least* eight, but then our mom caught us, and I guess she thought we were part of some crazy horrible paper cult, because she *shrieked* and kicked out all our candles and tore up our paper, and sent us to bed without any rock candy, and that night I started to wonder—maybe the paper somehow *knew* I was about to fold it eight times, and sent mom to stop me..."

"Is that a fact?" asked Applejack, that little smile growing on her lips as she spun around to smack a tree.

"It's a memory!!" answered Pinkie. "So I guess it's a fact if I trust my memory...and if *you* trust it. And you do trust my memory, don't you, Applejack? You know I wouldn't lie to you, and if I wouldn't lie to you, why would I lie to myself?!"

"Sugar, far as I kin reckon, you ain't got a lyin' bone in your body. Only reservation I got is that you've got so many amazin' thoughts in that head o' yours, it'd be a wonder if'n they didn't get tangled up every so often."

"I *know*!! And that's why I have to just lie down sometimes, and let the sun beam down on me, and let all my thoughts settle down, until they stop swirling and they're all where they belong...." And that's what she was doing now. Pinkie rested on her back, her hooves all in the air, her mane bunched up like a pillow. "I think I can feel my thoughts falling," she said. "There's one falling out of my right back leg, but I can't quite get it out, maybe if I shake...ooh, I think one landed on my tongue!"

Applejack stepped away from her overflowing buckets and stood over Pinkie, hearty amusement coloring her features. "This tongue right here?" she asked.

"Well of course, silly, how many tongues do you think I have? If I had more than one, it'd be creepy. I'd probably start talking with them all at once, and then no one could make any sense of what I was saying, not even you! And you're the best listener I think I ever met, Applejack, especially when you're bucking apples, because it's like you never get bored, and you never get annoyed, and it's just like, you're making me strong enough to go on thinking and talking, but if I had more than one tongue..."

"You still got that thought on yer tongue, sugarcube?"

"I bet!! I think I managed to make it bigger and now it's stuck in deep and I'll *never* get it out, unless I—"

"I'll jes' take care o' that for ya," said Applejack. And she leaned over. And Pinkie's eyes went wide—what was Applejack doing? Was she going to bite the extra thought right off Pinkie's tongue? What if she missed? What if she accidentally—"

Ohhhh, ohhh, ohhhh, OHHHH, OHHHHH, so this was what it was like to be KISSED!!

Pinkie shuddered and shut her eyes and floundered in the double warmth of the sun and...and her friend, her best friend, her brand new super best friend *forever!* She flung out her forelegs and hugged Applejack around the knees, and she didn't let the kiss end for a long, long time. When it was done, the words were gone from her. She didn't feel the need to talk endlessly anymore, and somehow she didn't mind.

"You kissed me!" Pinkie rasped.

Applejack was smiling, her hat askew. "Just my way of thankin' you for makin' mah workday a pleasant one!"

Pinkie felt a laugh welling up from deep in her gut. "Are we gonna be *fillyfriends* now?! Cause I've never had a real fillyfriend before, and it'd be so exciting, and I already know you and everything, and you're such a great listener, and I could throw us a party, and we could bake so many pies, and—'

"Hush now, sugar." Applejack's lips were inches from her own. "I'm game if you are, but you don't wanna spoil the surprise."

"The surprise?" whispered Pinkie, rapt on the ground.

"There's always gonna be surprises. That's what'll keep us fresh!" With a wink, Applejack hauled her laden cart away.

Pinkie paused for an amazed moment, and then pinwheeled around, still on her back, so that she could watch the farmer go.

That's when she knew things would be fresh forever.

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But that's also when she woke up, head swaddled in blankets in the chariot back to Ponyville, and cried out. Had Jackie's kiss really been heartfelt? Or had it just been the handiwork of a citrine apple in a golden necklace, locked away out of sight?

She had to know.

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#11: DF—The Finer Points of Weather

Weather Journal:

The clouds are shifting again. By now, I think I know what that means...they're teasing me, their holes crisscrossing until they find a neat little overlapping place where the sun can play Peek-a-Boo! Then, maybe the hole will grow and grow until the whole yard is engulfed in the warmth of summer.

For now, it's around sixty-five degrees, with occasional zephyrs. I don't mind the zephyrs. I love them! Sometimes, if they keep coming back, I like to give them names. There's a zephyr that keeps rushing up on me from the southwest, as though it's a little animal pouncing its mother! I call it Clive. Clive is so much fun when I've just come outside. Then there's one that likes to start low and swirl around and around until it zips away into the sky. I call that one Priscilla! I enjoy Priscilla most when I'm sitting in the tree swing, but she's always good for a little excitement.

The humidity is lower than yesterday. I'm guessing it's down to three dewdrops, which is still enough to be comfortable so long as it's not too hot. If it does get warmer, I hope Rainbow remembers to bring up the humidity accordingly. But if there's a lag, it may be even better—it could feel like an intermittent little tugging feeling of dryness, reminding me where I am—and then soothing, wonderful relief!

If she forgets the humidity entirely, I'll forgive her, of course. We're all learning as we go through life, after all.

Fluttershy looked up from her journal at the sudden break of light. She was right—the layers of clouds had finally found a hole, and sun was breaking through. It was better than she'd imagined it: the sunlight was so pure, and its aim was perfect! Rainbow was getting better and better at this every day.

"Wow, Fluttershy!" came Twilight Sparkle's voice, startling her into zipping under the table with a squeal. "Oh—I'm sorry! I didn't mean to scare you. I was just saying your yard looks amazing, especially with you and your table in the middle of that bright sunbeam."

It wasn't just Twilight. Pinkie Pie, Applejack and Rarity had all come to visit, too. Distracted as she'd been, Fluttershy hadn't noticed the sound of their hooves on the soft loam. She crept out from her hiding place and smiled bashfully. "It's because of the light," she confided. "Rainbow's giving me some quality time right now." She smiled upward, her face aglow with the sun's rays.

"She is?" queried Applejack. "Ah don' see her."

"Oh, she's up there," explained Fluttershy. "This is how our quality time works. I come out in the yard, and Rainbow makes it heavenly for me! She plays with the weather. She's gotten so good at controlling wind currents, temperature, humidity...and of course, the clouds."

Fluttershy spread her wings to indicate the glory of the stratus clouds, and everypony gazed along with her. It was silent and perfect.

"So while she's doing that," she continued, "I write in my weather journal. Sometimes I just write about the weather Rainbow gives me, like I was doing now. Sometimes I write poetry, instead! Or I make pretty pictures...and sometimes I just do chores like feeding the animals and enjoy the day. It's amazing to know that during our quality time, my whole home and the sky above it is like one big cradle, just for me!"

Rarity was nodding; Fluttershy had already discussed this with her in depth. Applejack, though, seemed skeptical. "Don't y'all actually spend any time together? Like, really together?"

Fluttershy smiled all too broadly. "Oh, yes. Sometimes we work together at making the breeze as perfect as we can. We fly against the wind in unison...and then, once it's just right, we lie in hammocks together and listen to the animals chattering, and soak in the wonderful breeze...and take pride in the fact that it's our doing." She felt herself blushing by the time she was done talking, and the realization made her blush further.

"That's beautiful, Fluttershy," said Twilight. "But I hope it's not distracting her from weather duty for the town."

"Nnnope!" called Rainbow's voice. A gust of warm wind struck them in advance of Rainbow's descent; apparently she'd heard them talking. "If anything, I'm better than ever!" Rainbow landed before the visitors, her mane billowing almost like Celestia's, only it was wind, not magic, that kept it going. "I used to count on other members of the team to handle all the little niggly stuff. Air pressure...ionization..."

"Well, subtle ain't exactly your watchword," remarked Applejack.

"It didn't use to be!" answered Rainbow. "But ever since Fluttershy and I became mates, I've been learning all kinds of tricks to keep her happy!"

"It's true," Fluttershy confirmed. "She's been learning all the finer points of weather. Just for me!"

Rainbow folded her wings and lifted her head proudly. "Yep! All that stuff I thought I'd never have time for. And I may have learned it for her, but it's paying off in my work! Did you hear? I won the Central Equestria Weather Technician of the Month

award a few weeks back! And Ponyville shot up to fourth place on Wingding Magazine's Best Climate list!"

"Well, congrats," said Applejack, tucking a foreleg in appreciation.

"That's wonderful, Rainbow!" exclaimed Rarity.

For the first time, then, Pinkie spoke—and her tone was uncharacteristically somber. "Yeah, that's great that you've been winning awards and getting snug-as-a-bug-in-a-rug with Fluttershy—even if you haven't actually been touching—but we've got news!"

This didn't sound good. Still, Fluttershy had to hope. "Good news?" she asked.

Pinkie shook her head.

"Humdrum news?" Fluttershy tried, her stance a little lower.

Again, Pinkie indicated in the negative.

Fluttershy sank to the ground. "Bad news?" she breathed.

Pinkie gave a grim little nod. "I dunno how to say this...so...maybe we should do charades or Hangmare or something like that until you guess it!" When Applejack's hoof thumped her side, though, she continued, "Or maybe I should just say it. Princess Luna thinks it's because of the Elements of Harmony that we all fell in love."

Wait...what?

"What do you mean?" asked Rainbow.

"I was just thinking about how perfect it was that we all paired up like we did, just like how *your* sonic rainboom gave us all our cutie marks! I was so excited I trembled all over the dessert table just thinking about it! That's when I knew it was a doozy, and I told Celestia, and Luna made her fess up."

Rainbow rared back in astonishment. "Are you saying...?"

"I'm *saying*," said Pinkie Pie, "that it was their magic that made us get so close! We bonded with the Elements, so they bonded us! Together! They put thoughts in our head and feelings in our hearts!"

"But..." Fluttershy looked around uneasily. "But I love Rainbow. I really do."

Rainbow looked between Fluttershy and Pinkie briskly, her face hardening into denial. "What are you talking about, Pinkie? I love Fluttershy because she's worth it! She's my oldest friend, and...and her heart's so strong...and I'll never let anyone

tear us apart! Never!"

Applejack stepped up. "Sorry, Rainbow, but ya gotta face facts. Y'all didn't used to be in love, did ya? That only started after we used the Elements a second time. And did ya hear what Pinkie said? The princesses *admitted* to it! Your love's not natural!"

Rainbow blinked a few times and looked at Fluttershy uncertainly, and it nearly broke Fluttershy's heart. She fell to her haunches, unable to speak.

"Sorry, Fluttershy," said Applejack. "It threw me for a loop, too. Ah stayed up all last night with my granny, cryin' it out over cider."

"And I told Mr. and Mrs. Cake," said Pinkie weakly, "and they were great. They helped me get through the pain...made sure I know that I really *am* loved...by so many ponies...and by Gummy..."

"I'm not so sure about Gummy," interjected Twilight, but Rarity shushed her.

"Ah wish we could jus' get through this together, like we do ev'rythin' else," said Applejack, hesitantly nuzzling Pinkie. "But ah don't know what I could say that you'd...be able t'take at face value."

Pinkie's head sank, her mane getting less floofy. Fluttershy heaved a deep sigh and stared at her love. She felt the tears welling.

"It feels so real," she murmured.

"It totally does," said Rainbow.

Twilight seemed to be struggling now. "Feelings are like that, guys. Sometimes we feel what our bodies...or external influences like magic...tell us to feel, and we tell ourselves it's genuine. We find reasons, and we embrace them..." Now she was looking longingly at Rarity. "And we swear they couldn't have come from anyplace but our true hearts, because that's where we *want* them to come from. ...But they don't," she finished quietly. "Sometimes they just don't."

"Yeah? And sometimes they do!" countered Rainbow, fluttering just off the ground.

"But how can you tell?" implored Rarity.

Rainbow opened her mouth for a retort, but instead she just hovered there silently, her tail undulating.

Fluttershy flew over and gave her a hug. Rainbow didn't protest; the two of them flipped and twirled about in midair, and kissed, and closed their eyes to the others.

"Flutter," moaned Rainbow. "I don't want to say goodbye..."

Fluttershy drew on one of her seldom-used reserves of inner strength. "It isn't really goodbye," she said. "We'll still be friends."

"But...you're so special to me..."

There wasn't anything more to say. Fluttershy cuddled her mate, and the two of them landed. The others were looking grim.

"Princess Celestia is looking for potential replacements to wield the Elements," said Twilight. "She's willing to unbind us if we ask her to."

Fluttershy had seen that coming, but it still felt like a boulder in her stomach. "...Should we?"

"We've gotta," said Applejack. "We owe it to ourselves for our feelin's to be genuine articles."

"Sad to say, I find I agree," said Twilight. "I've always believed in intellectual integrity...I have to believe in emotional integrity as well."

"I...but..." said Rainbow.

Fluttershy walked up to Twilight. "But Twilight. The princess placed her trust in us to be the keepers of the Elements. Is it really right for us to give that up, just to know...our true feelings?"

Twilight nodded sadly. "I think we have to."

Applejack walked up and nodded. "We gotta be honest with ourselves. Because if we can't trust our own feelin's...who can we trust?"

Fluttershy bowed her head. "Okay," she conceded. "I'm willing to do this."

She felt Rainbow's wings around her in a heartbeat; Rainbow embraced Fluttershy like a fallen tent in a storm, only with warmth, and will. "I'm gonna miss this so much," the weather pegasus whispered.

"I know," Fluttershy answered. "I will, too."

After that, no one wanted to leave. So they stayed—they spent the night sprawled on the loveseat, on the cushions and chairs, even in Fluttershy's bed, drinking ginseng tea and trying to comfort each other. No one knew quite what to say or who to say it to, so they said what came to mind, and played with the raccoons, and twittered to the birds in their birdhouses, and everyone cried at one point or another.

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Fluttershy awoke. It was night. The crickets were chirping too quickly.

She knew well that crickets altered the rate of their call based on the temperature. In the past, she'd used that fact to *gauge* the temperature. Since she and Rainbow had started sharing quality time, however, she'd learned to gauge temperature by feel alone. It was fifty degrees outside, and the crickets were chirping as if it were over sixty. She wondered why.

Maybe it was for the same reason her heart was racing. Fifteen days had passed since Celestia's birthday—fifteen days of second guessing, fear, and emotional chaos. After that first long night, they'd reluctantly sent word to Princess Celestia that they were, in fact, resigning the mantle of the Elements of Harmony. Celestia had written back in acknowledgement: She would begin searching for their replacements.

For the next week, Fluttershy hadn't spent a single night alone. Rainbow had stayed, clinging, and then she'd gone to be alone. Pinkie had slept in Fluttershy's chicken coop and taken breakfast with the birds each morning. Applejack had cooked meals in Fluttershy's kitchen for anypony who wanted the food. Even Rarity and Twilight had slept over twice, staring at Luna's sky and babbling aimlessly over tea and crumpets.

The town had talked. Fluttershy knew they had, even though she'd hardly left her home since getting the news. How could they not talk, with members of all three pony species sharing the same house—even the same bed for all they knew? Some townsfolk must have suspected perversion, but Fluttershy could live with that stigma. What she couldn't live without...was love.

At last, her friends had moved on, leaving Fluttershy to sleep alone. But then, she was never really alone, was she? Clive and Priscilla might be gone, but the world was always filled with creatures, many of which were her friends! Fluttershy had little doubt the crickets outside knew somehow this was an important night.

Did they somehow realize that Celestia had finally summoned them to the palace, and that tonight would be Fluttershy's last as the Element of Kindness? Probably not. But surely they realized that something was happening, and were chirping in anticipation.

And of course, there was Angel Bunny. Her little guardian Angel was always there, making sure she came to no harm. Fluttershy saw him there on his little rug, as awake as she was. Watching her.

"Oh, Angel." She slipped out of bed and went to lie beside him. "What do you think, Angel? Will I still be in love with Rainbow tomorrow?"

The rabbit twitched his nose. He pointed to the open window.

Fluttershy turned to face it. It wasn't hard to know what he was thinking. "I should go to her."

He nodded briskly.

Fluttershy poised herself at the windowsill, gathering her nerves. She glanced at her rabbit companion once more, then leapt into the night.

It was cold, but her heart warmed her from within. Fluttershy wasn't a pegasus of the heights by any stretch, so it felt strange to just ascend and ascend, but she had to. Rainbow's home, which normally drifted hither and yon over Ponyville, now hung in the sky over her cottage, as it had for the last fifteen days. Fluttershy relished the aches in her muscles as she rose. She was a pegasus of the zephyrs, not the heights, but she missed those zephyrs dearly—she wanted to bring them down again.

As the walls of the cloud dwelling took shape in her sight, Fluttershy started to wonder how she would wake Rainbow, or whether she would simply sit by her side and watch her longingly, one last time. But it was moot; as she rose before the window, she found her sky blue lover already there, staring. Rainbow gasped and screamed. Fluttershy screamed in reflex. Then Rainbow sprang through the window and hovered in the air, just feet away. Gaping.

"...Fluttershy?"

Fluttershy could only breathe and keep herself from falling.

Rainbow, too, seemed to be having an uncharacteristically hard time getting out her words. "Di—did you come to...say goodbye?"

Fluttershy nodded, eyes large.

Rainbow shook. She stared at the zenith of the sky, clear with stars. "It isn't right," she said.

"I know," agreed Fluttershy.

"If our love was...if it was really supposed to happen...then it'll still be there," Rainbow rationalized.

Fluttershy nodded over and over, squinting away tears. There was a long pause. It was still chilly, but no wind blew.

"You know what?" said Rainbow. "I don't care. Screw it! Screw what was meant to be! Screw what's really in our hearts. Let's not take the chance."

Fluttershy opened her eyes carefully and tried to focus. She flapped her wings and hung there, wracked with feelings, her body fighting to stay warm.

They wish to remain in the service of the Elements."

Celestia took this in, eyes large, her undulating mane seemingly at odds with her feelings. "I wish you had written to tell me."

Twilight bowed again and shut her eyes. "Forgive me, Princess."

The truth was, it had been hard enough making the long trek out. Correspondence hadn't felt right; this wasn't something they felt comfortable talking about. No one had seen them off that morning, and they'd said no goodbyes.

"I understand," said the princess.

She turned back to the anxiously waiting group. "Yogurt Cup. Holdfast. I'm very sorry to have raised your hopes." Celestia bowed to a slim white earth pony and blue-gray pegasus, her head almost touching the bricks. It was the first bow Pinkie had ever seen her make. "It seems your service will not be required."

The white mare's jaw quivered; the blue-gray stallion's nostrils flared. Were they going to be angry? No—they recovered.

"It's all right, your majesty," said the mare, her voice catching. "No worries."

"If you should ever need us..." breathed the stallion.

"I'll call," said Celestia. "Your kindness and loyalty will not go unremembered. But for now, you may return to your rooms, and the stewards will see you home."

The two bowed and left, leaving the mood even more somber than before.

But Celestia broke it with a shimmer of her horn and a flourish of her wings. "My dear friends...allow me to introduce your replacements!" She gestured then to a black unicorn stallion, whose horn was black at its base and lightened to white at its tip. "Applejack, please meet Vanishing Point, the new keeper of Honesty."

"Pleased t'make yer acquaintance," she mumbled, curtsying to the unicorn.

He only nodded back. Creepy!

Jackie seemed just as unnerved. "Cain't say I ever met anyone black before," she admitted. "Exceptin' Nightmare Moon, of course."

Pinkie thought that was a little rude of ~~Racistjack~~ Jackie, but the stallion didn't seem upset. "Don't worry—I'm perfectly trustworthy, and perfectly safe," he told her. Somehow, the way he said it left absolutely no doubt of his truthfulness.

"Glad to hear it," declared Jackie.

"Pinkie Pie," said Celestia, spurring Pinkie to whirl around on one forehoof with her nose pointing like a compass needle in her direction. "I believe you already know Derpy Hooves, once known as Bright Eyes. She will be replacing you as the keeper of Laughter."

Pinkie laughed anew. Of course she knew Derpy! "Sure! She delivers all the mail, and she makes a mean muffin!"

The gray pegasus craned her neck toward Pinkie, eyes boggling, and then stepped forward to bow deeply. "Most laugh."

Was that a compliment? "Well, I don't actually remember ever hearing you laugh," said Pinkie, "but hey! I'm sure you're silly enough to follow in my hoofsteps!"

"She laughs with her eyes," explained Celestia. "Rarity...this is Birch." The princess indicated a light tan earth pony with a simple crest of sandy hair and a little pendant around his neck.

"Hey!" he greeted, drawing forward with an approachable air.

"Charmed," said Rarity, dipping her head.

"Birch is a free spirit who travels from one charitable cause to the next," explained Celestia. "He will be the new keeper of Generosity. And finally...Twilight Sparkle, I would like you to meet Mistletoe, an accomplished herbalist and magician from the west country."

The unicorn she indicated was phosphorescent green with milky white hair. She smiled a vague smile and flourished a hoof, which Twilight shook. "It's an honor to meet you, Twilight Sparkle."

"Likewise!" said Twilight. "Anyone in Celestia's esteem has mine as well."

Now the princess faced them all serenely. "I should like you all to spend some time acquainting yourselves with your counterparts. This transition is difficult for all of us, but there isn't any reason we shouldn't carry it out as friends. Feel free to wander the terraces; I'll call you back after a while."

Though it was midday, there was a mist shrouding the sky that dampened the sun and made it feel like morning. The four pairs wandered over red bricks and cobbles, along walkways and railings overlooking lower terraces or stretches of the mountain. Pinkie could hear the others talking, but she and Derpy had little to say. Instead, they just did a lot of sporadic laughing at little things—birds overhead, funny scents on the breeze, and so on. Derpy's laughs were serpentine and bizarre, but Pinkie had to admit they were cute.

In time, they stood staring at the horizon, through the mist toward home. "Far duty," Derpy uttered.

"That's right," murmured Pinkie. "You'll be in charge of a whole Element of Harmony for the whooole country. I hope you're up to it!"

Derpy soared from the overlook to hover a few yards above. "Up to it!" she exclaimed.

"Oh yeah?" challenged Pinkie. "Can you tell a joke?"

The pegasus reflected, her wings beating. "How many green?" she riddled.

"Is that the start of your joke? Uhhh...I dunno! How many green?"

Derpy swooped down as she delivered the punchline. "*Too many frog!*" she cried gleefully.

Pinkie found herself awash in laughter. "You *are* a good joke teller!" she agreed, locking eyes with the wall-eyed pegasus. "I think we're gonna be okay."

Derpy offered Pinkie a nuzzle she was all too glad to accept.

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When the introductions were over, Celestia called them all back and instructed the new keepers to wait on various points of the brick star, with Mistletoe in the middle. Twilight, Rarity, Jackie and Pinkie were directed to stand off to the side, at the ends of the rows of guards, facing each other.

Celestia stood beyond the four of them and lowered her head solemnly. "I had hoped you would live out your lives with this mantle still upon you," she said softly. "With you, I resurrected a long chain of keepers, and though you held the Elements only briefly, you made quite a difference. My friends, history will not forget you."

Twilight hung her head. "I'm so sorry to disappoint you, Princess."

"Not at all, my faithful student. As my sister has impressed upon me, the fault is mine for concealing the Elements' true nature." She looked the four over momentarily. "You are brave," she told them, "to risk losing your love."

"With any luck," said Rarity, "we won't truly lose it."

"Ah'd hate to think ev'rythin' ah feel for Pinkie just ain't real," mourned Jackie. "But ah gotta know for sure."

Of course," said Celestia. "In that case, I wish you all the best of luck. Remain still where you are, and the bonds will be broken."

The spell was spectacular. It rose from the ground in a wave of electricity, emotion

and light. The four ponies stood transfixed upon each other, their bodies tense, their hair standing up and waving. Pinkie was filled with wonder, with love for Jackie, and most of all, with intense hope that her love wouldn't disappear.

Please, Pinkie thought, leave me Jackie. Don't rip her out of my heart! Please, please, please!

She felt herself going lightheaded as the laughter rose away.

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As Pinkie was applying compote to the last quince spongecake of the day, the bell rang. She looked up eagerly, but it was only Twilight Sparkle.

"Twi! It's good to see you. I heard about you and Scratch. Are you okay?"

The unicorn stalked in, visibly upset but ready to munch her way through it. Years of party therapy had trained Pinkie to recognize that state of mind. "Could be better," she snapped.

"Aww, Twilight! You need a dessert, don'tcha? And something nice to drink?"

Twilight heaved a sigh, plopping herself down on a stool. "Anything you say, Pinkie."

"I'll fix you up a lemon carimelt and an EBA smoothie," Pinkie offered. "On the house!"

"Everything But Apples? Pinkie, you're still seriously doing that?"

She shrugged helplessly. "What can I say? I had enough apples to last a lifetime."

"But...you...." Twilight slumped. "Sure. That'll be great."

As she prepared the treats, Pinkie felt that familiar pain again. In the wake of the spell separating her from the Element of Laughter, she'd felt so deflated it seemed like a miracle the balloons in her cutie mark hadn't popped. But why didn't it get better? Why couldn't she go back to the way she'd been before she'd met Twilight?

Now Twilight was beginning to rant. "How can there possibly be so many different types of music, anyhow? So what if I don't know the difference between post-darkwave speedcore and proto-electropunk? I swear, it's worse than paleobotany!"

Pinkie brought the drenched lemoncake and smoothie out to the counter. "You didn't take her music seriously enough, huh?"

Twilight shook her head sadly. "And I thought she was just after some fun. I

swear, Pinkie! The Element of Magic spoiled me! It turns out finding lasting love in the real world is a nightmare!"

"Have you tried asking Celestia for help?"

Twilight sighed. "Yes...and I have to give her credit—she does give good-sounding advice. I admit, I was worried the princess wouldn't care about me anymore now that I've stopped leading the Elements of Harmony...but she still writes as often as ever."

"Well, good!" exclaimed Pinkie.

"Still!" said Twilight, her mouth dripping with caramel. "Even she can't help someone like me find a solid relationship."

"Maybe you're just not ready," Pinkie suggested. "I mean, Rarity's the oldest of any of us, and she told me she's done dating for a while."

"She told *me* she's 'waiting for someone younger'," said Twilight. Which I *hope* doesn't mean what I think it means. But I miss her, Pinkie! I miss our high society life...I miss our burlesque act. I miss gazing through the skylight we had in our bedroom!"

So Twilight missed everything but Rarity herself? "Well, you could still do the act, couldn't you? You don't need to be *together* just to tour together."

Twilight shook her head and took in a draught of her smoothie. "It's not who I am. I was in the biz for her."

"It's too bad," Pinkie observed. "You were good at it."

Abruptly, Twilight locked eyes with her and snorted. "You know what, Pinkie? Sometimes I'm jealous...of Dash and Fluttershy."

The tears came without warning to Pinkie's face. "Me too," she whimpered.

Twilight took a big bite of lemoncake. "I don't know what's so great about integrity anymore," she moaned. "Celestia was right not to tell us the whole truth! She knew what was best for us all along...and now it's too late."

Pinkie turned away to put her final quince cake on display. She didn't want Twilight to see her face.

"I'm not the only one who feels like this, am I?" Twilight asked. "You miss Applejack...don't you?"

"Yeah," whispered Pinkie, her eyes wide and moist.

"But your love is gone...isn't it?"

Pinkie stood in silence for a few moments. The passion was gone, yes. It had felt like an inflatable chair giving out—she'd crashed hard. But there was a pressure inside her...she was coming to suspect why the pain wouldn't leave her alone.

"I...think it's still there," she breathed. "And I need to help it out."

Twilight looked up in surprise.

Pinkie came around and gave her a kiss, just under her bangs. "Sorry, Twilight. I'm closing shop for today. You can let yourself out."

Twilight sighed and closed her eyes.

Pinkie went to the door, but hesitated. "I hope you feel better real soon," she said. "If you need a party...for any reason at all...just ask."

The purple unicorn nodded and resumed drowning her sorrows with her smoothie. Pinkie slipped out. She cantered, and then galloped, for the path leading to Sweet Apple Acres.

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Pinkie couldn't help but smile at the smell of the donut trees. As the sky grew dark, she walked beneath groves of magically grown trees sporting donuts, crullers, apple danishes, and apple puff pastries. It had taken the knowledge of Twilight, Lyra, Bonbon and Pinkie put together to create these marvels from ordinary apple trees. The fact that Jackie still tended and harvested them like any other crop touched Pinkie deeply. She remembered how skeptical Jackie had been of the idea at first...and how thoroughly she'd come to love it over time, once the pastries had started budding.

The aroma was amazing. Pinkie let herself glide down along the bark of a tree—they all smelled like cinnamon, cloves and cardamom. She sprawled there, letting her memories feed her. What did she need an old magical necklace for? The love she felt for Jackie was real, even it had been reduced to a seed looking for sunlight. She could feel it sprouting all over again.

The sound of a cart pushing through fallen foliage drifted near. Pinkie shot to her feet. Even through all that sweetness, Jackie's scent was still familiar.

She waited until that pretty orange nose came into view. Pinkie had once loved that nose, and she *knew* she could learn to love it again. She stepped forward, crushing leaves, and put on a little smile.

Jackie stopped, startled. She stared.

And sat, right there in the autumn leaves.

Pinkie was shaking now. She just knew Jackie felt the same way. Didn't she? "I," she said.

The farmer blinked. Several times. But as she sat there, taking in Pinkie's fervent look, she seemed to suddenly get it.

"Wish," said her tangy voice.

Pinkie fought to quell her trembling. "We," she whispered.

There was a pause, and a tremor in Jackie's voice. "Could."

"Somehow..."

Another pause. "Be," said Jackie, her voice breaking.

Pinkie couldn't resist. "Cupcakes!" she said. No! What was she thinking?! She'd ruined it!

But Jackie chuckled. "Together," she said.

Pinkie sighed with relief. "In..."

"A."

"Box."

"Of."

"Cupcakes," Pinkie laughed.

"For," Jackie continued.

"Ever," concluded Pinkie. She choked on her own breath. "Jackie, please," she wheezed. "I know we said it was gone. I thought it was gone. But I...I still love you! It's just that...without the laughter inside, the songs and bells and sunshine living in my ribcage...I didn't realize there was anything left. But there is! I love you!"

With a deep shudder, Jackie rolled her shoulders. "Ah was hopin' ah wasn't the only one," she cried.

Pinkie went to her and sank her face into the farmer's blond hair. "You're the apple of my eye," she sobbed. "You always will be."

Jackie took on a wry but caring tone. "Ya know, Pinkie...jus' because ah farm apples

don't *make* me an apple."

Drawing her head back, Pinkie gave her beloved a smile. "Oh, sure. And I suppose Fluttershy isn't secretly a tree, either!"

Jackie laughed as if she were just learning how, her burdens falling away. "Ah'll be *your* apple."

"And I'll be your cobbler," murmured Pinkie. She kissed Jackie on the bridge of her beautiful little nose. Pinkie laughed then, and though it took all her strength, it was as sweet and heartfelt as if she were still laughter's vassal. She kissed and kissed, and knew that somewhere, a blue topaz in a gold necklace was shining, and a gray pegasus called Derpy Hooves was bubbling with laughter.