

“That’s all for today. I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

The sound of chairs sliding along the floor filled the classroom in the Ponyville schoolhouse. Young fillies and colts scrambled to gather their bags from the cubbies in the back of the room, talking excitedly to one another.

Dawn and Dusk rose from their desks, talking to Early Blaze as they walked towards the back of the room.

“What do you think of school so far?” Dusk grabbed her bags with her teeth, and slung them onto her back.

Blaze smiled excitedly, “I like it a lot! There’s so much stuff to learn, it’s amazing!”

Dawn rolled her eyes, “Try reading through the whole library like she has.” She pointed a free hoof at her sister, “At least class is more interesting than all those books.”

Dusk frowned, “Well if *you* had read anything, you would be able to control your magic. Remember what happened last year?”

Dawn kept her facial features flat, restraining from giving her sister the pleasure of a response. Blaze looked confusedly between the two of them, “What happened last year?”

“Nothing,” the twins responded simultaneously.

“Ok...” Blaze shrugged, “Bye Cheerilee!” She waved her hoof as she left the classroom with the twins.

The sun was hovering just past the top of the sky, warming the air outside. Blaze breathed the air in deeply, feeling a sense of calm wash over her. It was immediately replaced by the excitement practically beaming from Dawn.

“Can you believe the big sleepover is tomorrow?” Dawn hopped up and down as the others walked, “I mean, it’s going to be *so* cool. Mom is going to come down from Canterlot, and Aunt Rainbow is going to give us flying lessons!”

“Ooo,” Blaze said.

“And Rarity is coming back from Canterlot! She’ll be teaching us how to refine our magic,” Dusk beamed. “Of course mom is going to teach us the actual spells.”

“Wow,” Blaze added.

“But the best part is that your mom and dad are bringing you too, Blaze! We’re going to have a blast!” Dawn hopped around her friend, giddy with excitement.

Blaze’s eyes lit up, “Really?”

“Yeah, didn’t they tell you yet?”

“Well...” the red maned filly looked to the sky in thought, “I think she said something about it, but I was reading some of my mom’s books.”

Dawn rolled her eyes. Dusk lit up like a torch, “Ooo! Which book?”

Dawn sighed, tuning out their rapid conversation. As they walked through Ponyville, she gazed at the sky in thought. A gray streak went from cloud to cloud, knocking them lazily from the sky.

Dawn loved watching other pegasi fly. Even more than that, she loved the skies and everything that they held: stars, clouds, rain, snow, and Aunt Tia’s sun. She would never willingly admit to reading about the sky to anyone but Aunt Rainbow and only then because she had been caught reading late one night after her sister had drifted to sleep.

She mused on that thought, as she lowered her gaze to the market, which was unusually crowded. Slowly the sounds around her began to trickle back to her ears.

“...I don’t know. I never read that far into the book-”

“Hey Dusk, is there something special planned for today?” Dawn interrupted.

Dusk jumped a little, surprised that her sister was still there. She never noticed when she got carried away. “Uh...” The young alicorn racked her brain, trying to remember the list of local holidays, “Not that I remember.”

“Hmm. I wonder why there’s such a large crowd?”

A voice among the crowd shouted, “Darlings!”

They immediately recognized the pony attached to that voice.

A white unicorn barreled her way through the crowd, knocking down several unfortunate ponies in the process. Her well-groomed mane bounced along as she trotted over to the three fillies. The unicorn was wearing a deep blue dress lined with sapphires and amethysts, which sparkled in the late afternoon sun.

The white unicorn wrapped her forelegs around the twins, squeezing them tight, “My stars, have you grown! I’ve missed you so much these past months. You simply must tell me what you did over the summer.”

“We missed you too... Rarity,” Dawn managed. She found that it was becoming difficult to talk, let alone breathe.

Blaze grinned slyly at their ordeal, snickering under her breath.

“Oh, and Early Blaze!” Rarity removed her vice like grip from the twins, turning her attention towards the red-maned filly. Blaze’s smile dropped, a small whimper escaping her before she was engulfed in the mare’s grasp, “You should come with Fluttershy and I to the spa this weekend. It would do wonders for that marvelous mane of yours.”

“O...k...”

Rarity let go of Blaze, “Why don’t I walk you home, Blaze? I want to hear about **everything** you’ve been doing since I last visited. Ponyville is so much livelier than Canterlot – city life is **far** too predictable.”

Rarity prodded Blaze forward, leaving her no say in the matter at all. Journalist pegasi floated above her, taking pictures or scribbling away on their notepads.

“Let’s go before those journalists come after us too,” Dusk whispered.

Dawn looked at her quizzically for a moment, before nodding and following her into the nearest building: Sugarcube Corner.

Pinkie Pie was hard at work in the bakery, mixing tough batter in her favorite mixing bowl. A look of excitement and concentration on Pinkie’s face was all the twins needed to know that she was making something new. They waited patiently for Pinkie to finish, looking instead at all of the delicious treats in the case.

Inside were cupcakes with all different types of frosting smothered over them. Slices of cake lay on plates in different patterns, like rainbows, hearts, and flowers. Cookies filled the top of the case all in neat little rows, with a pair of tongs sitting next to each tray. The fillies, however, were far more interested with the bottom of the case.

In the bottom of the case was a large hollow area Pinkie made to store candy. It was more than enough to satisfy the sweet tooth of every pony in Ponyville *including* Pinkie.

“Hi girls!” Pinkie chirped. Her voice was followed by a heavy thud on the counter.

The fillies jumped, turning their focus on the multicolored ball on the counter.

“Whooooa,” Dawn stared in awe, “what is it?”

“Its my newest flavored taffy: Rainbow Fruit Punch! I made the flavor myself. I liked it so much that I just had to think of something to use it on. Then I remembered that the bestest, most fantastic flavor had to go in the chewiest, gummiest thing I could make. So I thought for a while, but couldn’t think of anything and then I got hungry so I went down to the kitchen to have a snack, which was taffy and it made me hungrier for taffy. That’s when I figured out that I wanted taffy with my favoritist flavor ever. Try it!”

Pinkie used the mixing spoon to cut two pieces of taffy, handing one to each of the fillies. Dawn shoved it into her mouth, chewing momentarily before swallowing. Her sister on the other hand decided to chew the taffy slowly, resulting in a very confused look on her face.

“So what do you think?” Pinkie asked.

“I like it!” Dawn said, hopping up and down.

“What do you think Dusk?”

Dusk had stopped chewing altogether, her brows now narrowed in frustration.

“You know you’re supposed to swallow it, right?” Dawn said.

Dusk swallowed what was left of the taffy. She chewed absent-mindedly, still trying to figure out the flavors. Finally, she looked up incredulously at Pinkie, “Did you mix together every flavor you had in the kitchen?”

“No. I mixed every flavor I had in the kitchen **and** I went into the party catalog and ordered all the flavors that I **didn’t** have. I even went into my personal party supplies for the ones that are super-duper hard to get. Then I mixed them all together.”

Dusk simply couldn’t comprehend what Aunt Dash referred to as ‘Pinkie Pie being Pinkie Pie,’ but she had a suspicion this was one of those times.

“You should totally bring that to the sleepover tomorrow!” Dawn chimed in. “I bet everyone would love to try some.”

“That’s a fantastic idea! I’ll make sure to make more for tomorrow,” Pinkie rambled. “But I have to cut this taffy before I can make more. Hey! I just had the bestest idea ever! You could help me make some more taffy!”

“Sure!” Dawn giggled.

“Uh... No thanks. I’ll tell Aunt Rainbow that you’re helping Pinkie Pie, Dawn. Just... try not to use magic this time,” Dusk said.

“You know I won’t,” Dawn retorted. *You know I can’t*, she thought bittely.

“Good,” Dusk snickered to herself. “Maybe after the sleepover you can try baking with magic.”

“I will, and I’ll prove it.”

“We’ll see.”

Oblivious to the argument, Pinkie Pie bounced to the front door. “C’mon Dawn, we have to make more Rainbow Fruit Juice! You can even taste it before we mix it in.” Pinkie flipped the sign on the door to read ‘Closed’ and hopped her way into the kitchen. Dawn watched her sister leave the shop before dropping her mask of confidence. She looked up at her horn with disdain.

“I wish you would just work. Stupid horn...”

Pinkie Pie stuck her head out of the kitchen, “Dawn?”

Dawn perked up, plastering a smile on her face. “Coming,” she said, trotting into the kitchen.

Rainbow Dash went about the library's kitchen, picking through the stack of books she had laid out on the table. Most of them she had already read – they covered the basics of one of the most complicated things she'd ever done:

Cooking.

Not that it was terribly difficult for her to boil some water and stick some powdered soup, or macaroni and cheese mix in. No, the real challenge came when she was first asked to watch the girls during their first school year – she had to cook **real** food. Well, healthy food was what everypony else had called it. Too much grain wasn't ok for growing young fillies, and neither was a lot of dairy. So the name of the game became balancing what kind of food they were going to eat.

But, even after years of learning how to cook, she still had trouble figuring out **what** to cook. That's what the new books were for. A brand new set of books had arrived the day before, including a book on French Cuisine. Looking through it, she had found an interesting recipe, one that required several ingredients she had never heard of. So, she decided to improvise.

She stirred the pot on the stove. A sweet scent of lavender bubbled up into the air from the syrup she was making – one of Pinkies recipes she had borrowed. On the counter were several thin slices of pastry dough from Sugarcube Corner... and several burnt attempts at making the dough herself.

“Ok, I'm ready,” said a blue alicorn mare, entering into the kitchen. The princess of the moon, Luna, had completely removed her royal attire, exchanging it instead for a simple white cooking apron.

“Cool. Now, what I need you to do is to get a bunch of those violets from the fridge. The lavender syrup is almost ready,” Dash said, pointing a free hoof at the fridge.

Rainbow still thought it was a little weird to see the princess without her royal armor. But when it came to Luna's family, Dash knew more than most. Visits in the summer consisted of quick dips in the lake, followed by fireworks every Summer Sun Celebration weekend. Regardless of where the yearly celebration took place, the family would always come to Ponyville for a big cookout. Rainbow was almost always on alfalfa burger duty while the rest of her friends would gather to partake in the results. Despite Luna's position, she enjoyed being treated as any other pony; the apron simply added to that today.

Magic shimmered over her horn, gently prying the door open. A good-sized container hovered out and over to the counter, settling into place.

Dash took the pan off of the stove, flicking the power off as she turned.

“Luna, could you grab those pastries?”

“Sure.” The plates containing the pastries floated over, landing on the counter in front of her. Rainbow moved some of the flowers into the center of each with a free hoof and with the other drizzled the hot syrup over the flowers and exposed pastry dough. She placed the pot back on the stove and turned back to the counter.

“Wow, Rainbow. You've become quite the chef,” Luna said, watching her roll up each pastry.

“I guess. It takes a lot of work though,” she said. She produced a pan from one of the drawers and placed it on the counter, “I've practically read every cookbook in the library. This is my attempt at making ‘Crepes’. It's a French dish.”

The oven door closed on the pastries. Rainbow set the timer and turned to Luna, “All set. I have to take a shower, but I'll be back down before the timer finishes. I have to put a storm together for tonight so it'll be clear for the sleepover tomorrow. The girls usually stop by Sugarcube Corner on the way home, but they should be here soon.”

“I'll be here. Celly let me leave Canterlot today so I could surprise them.” A big smile filled the mare's

face, “They’ll be so happy.”

“Yeah,” Rainbow smiled. “Thanks again for the help.”

“Anytime,” Luna said.

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The castle sat quietly in the evening storm, as thunder boomed in the air above. Rain pounded into the stone, causing a constant rumble within the castle interior. Further underground in the dungeons, storerooms, and all the other nooks and crannies below, that rumble died down to a low hum. It was fitting to have a planned storm over the valley. It mirrored her mood: tired, sad, frustrated, and most of all, ready to unleash her fury upon anything at the slightest provocation. That fury fueled her determination ever since Spike had brought her that book – the only book with the answers she desired.

The sound of grinding stone filled the underground chamber as the large stone door slid shut. Torches flared to life all around the room, revealing empty bookcases and broken tables. It appeared as though it hadn’t been used in ages. Except, that is, for one particular bookshelf.

Celestia made her way across the room, using her magic to begin the process of dusting the room. As the clouds of dirt and grime were tossed in the air, the princess’ magic gathered it up into a ball. Her magic branched out further to the broken tables, binding the wood together. Fire poured out of her horn, filling the room with more light than it had ever been exposed to. The roaring noise from the flames became unbearable and the light began to white out the features.

The magic cut off abruptly, the room becoming immediately quiet and still. Celestia looked around at her work – the room was spotless. More importantly, unless one knew where it was, the secret entrance to her... private study... was well hidden. The telltale glow of magic enveloped her horn once more, loosening the seal on the floor, allowing the bookcase to slide downward out of sight. The torches behind her dimmed as she passed through the new entrance in the wall, extinguishing once the shelves rose back into place.

The new room was small, lit only by a single torch over a desk. The book she had studied over the whole week was propped up against the wall, with candles, salts, and other miscellaneous items around it. On the other end of the room, the back wall was completely shrouded in darkness. A wall of iron bars sealed off the darker part of the room, doing nothing to hide the smell of mold and rotting books coming from it.

However, this space had been perfect for privacy and security. Before the room became an archive, it served as a dungeon for prisoners in Equestria’s first civil war. Those with enemy intelligence were left here below until they broke, or died.

The sound of chains scraping together filled the room with a hollow metallic ring. From the darkness came a bead of red, then, another. Each of them winked once, before becoming clear red orbs, with a slit of black in the center of each.

“Good evening, Princess,” came a voice behind her. It came slow, sweet, and dripping with malice, “I’m surprised to see you so soon.”

The princess hovered several of the salts onto the desk, mixing one into another. One of the pages turned. The sound of movement behind her did nothing to break her concentration.

“I suppose more research tonight as well? Surely its not an interrogation, as your techniques have gotten... rusty over time.” The red eyes disappeared for a moment, “It’s to be expected really, a monthly visit to my humbled existence lessens the blow of even the best techniques.”

The door to the archive room opened. The various materials lying around the book hovered out

through the door. Celestia began rummaging through whatever was hidden in the desk drawers. Each new material was flung in the air hovering past the imprisoned pony before disappearing: dragon scales, leaves of poison joke, different colored candles, and several jars with things he couldn't quite put his forehoof on. He heard two items land on the desk in front of her, but was having trouble seeing exactly what they were.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bother you while you've been so busy. Are you moving us down a level? I think it would be cooler. Its always so hot in here."

Celestia glared in the direction of the cage. He always tried to get a rise out of her. But she wasn't having it tonight. A sharp magical burst from her horn slammed into the bars of the cage. Electricity arced from the bars, slamming the prisoner to the ground.

He laughed. It started slow at first, soft chuckles like the ticking of a clock. But it grew. Simple laughter turned to mad hysterics that echoed from every direction – a chorus of insanity on all sides. Another burst of magic did nothing to stop him from continuing.

Celestia frowned and moved out of the room.

"Priceless! I was waiting for you to show me something new. How... refreshing!" Crazy giggles filled the room with whispered echoes. "**That's** the teacher I remember."

Celestia spun around and stormed back towards the cell. Her horn glowed as bright as the sun, pouring magic into the cage. The bars ignited blasting the inside with waves of searing heat. The prisoner dove under the cot in the corner. The smell of singed hair came from his smoldering, blue mane.

The fire died down until the flames stood only at the base of the cage.

"Is that sufficient for you? Have you had your fun, my traitorous, conniving, disgrace of a student!?" Celestia's voice boomed throughout the room and the ground quivered as she spoke. "You destroyed cities and marred the trust of everypony in this country! On top of that, you fake your death to give your body to that... that half-blooded brat. To this world you are dead! If you weren't necessary I would have killed you **WHERE YOU STAND!**"

There was silence. Then a smile crept onto the prisoner's face. He walked forward, his violet coat dulled and matted with grime. His blue mane had strands of silver and gold weaved throughout. The stallion stopped just behind the bars, "How long have you been fighting her, Celestia?"

Celestia snorted, slowly losing will to continue her rage. "What was that, **mule?**"

"Nightmare's left her mark. You've fought it well."

Celestia stopped short. A mirror sped into the room, hovering in front of the princess' face. There, in plain view was something... unusual. One of her eyes had become that of a dragon, a red glow coming from behind it. She closed that eye immediately.

"It seems it was destiny for me to survive," he egged on, now as close to the bars as he would dare. "Your greatest student to ever live."

"Not for much longer, Starfall," she responded with a smile.