

There were only two types of ponies up at this time of day, before the Sun had even crested the horizon; farmer and bakers.

Pinkie Pie skipped and bounced up the road to Sugarcube Plaza, her bag of ingredients rising and falling in turn. Today was a lucky day, as she'd managed to fish out some extra honeycombble stones from her stash. The irregular spheres of amber occasionally made it out of the bag along with everything else, despite their relative weight.

"Sugarplums for meeee, buzz like a beee~" she sang as she pronked. "Mash it into paste, not a lot to waste~"

She thought she'd run out last week, but one last bag had simply slipped into a crack between the pile of baking ingredients that occupied her livingroom couch and the mound of gelatin that'd absorbed her coffee table. She would have to use them woefully sparingly, but with her extensive knowledge of rock cooking, she had a feeling it would be fine.

Hopping off the stonework, the doors of Sugarcube Corner eased open and closed with a practised, silent grace. Pinkie was always the first into work, and with the Twins in their first little growth spurt, she needed to be even quieter than usual. The Mr. and Mrs. would be down to join her in an hour or so, by which point the smell of honey would be rising from the kitchen to greet them.

Smiling at the thought, Pinkie placed her bag down on the counter and gathered the bowls and utensils she would need. The rocks came out first, rolling to a stop on the chopping board. Their surfaces were semi-transparent, like solidified globules of amber, and their orange-yellow was bold, even moreso than the other batches. Either they were going bad, or—Pinkie gave a little gasp—maybe she'd used the rest too soon and missed out on the tastiness of a more mature crop??

The very thought horrified her; father would've sent her to the mines for wasting such gloriously tasty rocks.

Were these ones heavier than the others? The scale came out and Pinkie mortar-and-pestil'd the first rock into paste. The hints of yellow disappeared into a deeper orange, leaving a layer of glistening sugar-silt along the edges of the bowl. This would be enough for about one-point-six cakes.

Into the mixing bowl it went, along with an unbroken lump that'd been freed from the core of the stone...

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Thirty minutes left in the oven, down came the first set of sleepy trots.

"Morning, Mr. Cake!" Pinkie greeted with a happy wave.

"Mornin', Pinkie!" the stallion responded, eye drifting to her hoof. "What's that you're working on?"

"More honeycombbble cake! I found an extra batch!"

"Oh, good! Those were really popular last week! Although... it isn't like you to mis-count ingredients." He gave her an awkward sideways grin. "Are you sure you weren't 'testing recipies' again?"

She looked guilty for a moment, knowing she had felt tempted at the time, but shook her head. "Nope! Cross my heart and hope to fly—"

"—stick a cupcake in my eye," he finished for her. "Speaking of which, I'll make a start. We got that order of raspberry jam last evening, so make that your next go-to."

Pinkie gave a salute and trotted over to one of the mixing bowls. Another batch of batter, coming right up!

Pinkie rubbed her eye, but whatever feeling she thought had been there had faded. Hm.

She gave her orange-stained hooves a wash and started on her next task; raspberry pie. The bags of fresh produce emerged from the larder, the tiny, tasty, orange orbs shining so clearly through the netting—

Huh...?

Pinkie blinked. That was weir—

She rubbed her eye again, and wondered why she was still standing still. Shrugging her shoulders, she pulled the bags onto the counter and stripped a few of the stalks onto a plate, each and every druplet looking as clear as the last, as, like any true baker, she had an eye for all of them. With a mash mash mash they joined some batter to add their sweet, sugary flavour to whatever food they were going to become.

Pie, that was it. She had to keep the task in mind.

"Hey, Pinkie, you wouldn't mind fetching me the strawberries... from..."

"Huh? Is something wrong?" Pinkie asked, already holding the strawberries as she exited the larder.

"You got a... little... something up there," Mr. Cake answered, pointing at his right eye.

She gave him a few dozen quizzical looks and stuck another cupcake in her compound eye, but there was nothing out of place. "What is it? Is there something on my face?"

"M-more like... in your face? You sure you're ok?"

She offered him a smile, her ear twitching as part of her consciousness registered the odd 'cri'k'ck coming from one side of her mouth. "I'm never not-ok when I'm baking! Now come on, we gotta stay focused!" she responded with an encouraging click from her mandible, tossing the pack of strawberries over to him.

He still looked somewhat hesitant for some reason.

"I-I gotta..." Mr Cake placed the pack on the counter. "I gotta go see somepony for j-just a moment. You keep on baking, Pinkie. I'll be right back."

Pinkie gave him a slightly worried look. That wasn't normal. Inefficient, too. Now she was going to have to handle all of this herself until he got back!

She raised her nose and took in the scent of the honeycombble cakes, and chirruped to herself in delight. They smelled even better then they had when she found them. Riper, too. Everypony would love them once they were ready!

So, on the morning went. Preparations came along much quicker than the mare was used to. Who needed a pair of extra hooves when you already had a pair of extra hooves? The Cakes were clearly missing a trick. Hovering above the counters as she worked felt like a new experie—

No, don't worry about that, just keep the food coming. It would be opening time soon, and she was still so busy! When was Mr. Cake coming back? It felt like it'd been all morning since he skedaddled his way out of the kitchen. That wasn't like him.

At least Mrs. Cake was more dedicated.

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"I-I don't know when it started, exactly, I-I jus- she was normal one minute, and then I saw her eye! It was spreading by the second!"

Carrot Cake was nervy on a good day, but whatever had happened to Pinkie had shaken him badly.

"And the wife's in there, too?"

The question clearly troubled him, but he nodded. "She tried to reason with her, but—o-oh dear—Pinkie... the whole place was already covered, and I think it must've gotten in her mouth somehow, a-and—"

Applejack gave him a pat on the shoulder, her look of understanding quickly turning to one of determination as she noticed the Twins, held safe by their pa like a pair of invaluable saddlebags.

"I ain't dealt with curses before, but I've wrangled more than enough bug ponies to sort out whatever's causin' this. You go on and wake Twilight. She's useless at this kinda hour, but, y'know, jus' t' be safe."

The baker gave a nod and galloped away.

The front room floor of Sugarcube Corner was wet and sticky. The cabinets were stocked to bursting, moreso than Applejack had ever seen, but every item was covered in a thick layer of orange goo, like some grim mixture of honey and changeling silk. The sounds of food preparation continued unabated in the room beyond, along with far too much buzzing for the farmer's taste.

Sure enough, the kitchen was a complete mess; thick layers of honey covered every surface, every cupboard was open and their contents were scattered around the room in various states of use. The larder might have fared even worse, were Applejack able to see through the surprisingly well-decorated array of honeycomb blocking the entrance.

"Heyyy, welcome back, honeybu— Oh! Miss Applejack!" Mrs. Cake joyfully greeted, her tone matched with a somewhat deep, reverberating buzz from the base of her throat. Her new mandibles turned her grin into a stretched X shape, but despite her transformation the positive feelings came through in droves.

The other creature's antennae shot up and, in a voice that was unmistakably Pinkie's, greeted her, "Applejack! I'm so happy to see you!"

Applejack cringed at the sight; an orange and black coat, without a single sign of her pink left, a pair of huge, glowing yellow compound eyes like a sickly changeling, and a big, bulbous, glushing sac swaying from her back end, visibly full of honey.

"Y-yeah. You, too." She risked a step forward into the room, dislodging the hoof only to bury it in an even deeper layer of sweet-smelling goo. "You two jus' makin' an' makin' food in here...?"

"Yup!" Pinkie replied as her second set of forelegs whisked away at another batch of cake batter. "But we'll be out of ingredients by the time the shop opens, so could I ask you for a really tiny favour?"

Applejack narrowed her eyes and readied her lasso. She'd faced enough snarky villains to know how this part always went. "L'mme gueff, y' wan' me t' do fum tafe tefting?"

The two bee ponies paused for a moment before they both let out a shrill sound of joy. "You would?!" Pinkie blurted, her mandibles chittering in unbridled glee.

*beep, beep, beep, beep*

"Oh! Perfect timing!" Mrs. Cake exclaimed. Her current task was dropped harmlessly into the honeyfied floor and she buzzed over to the oven. "We're so lucky to have the chance to give a friend an early taste!"

Out came a fresh batch of pies, and in went the lasso, darting forward and scattering the tray across the floor, three of the pies remaining intact as they sank into the honey, and the last bursting into chunks as it landed in Pinkie's hardened chitin hooves.

"O-oh," said Pinkie. The only piece left was a dark chunk with something visibly moving in the middle. She rubbed some raspberry bits off her eye and the smile popped back onto her face as quickly as it had left.

"Well..." Pinkie said, staring into the embryo, "that's no way to be a team player."