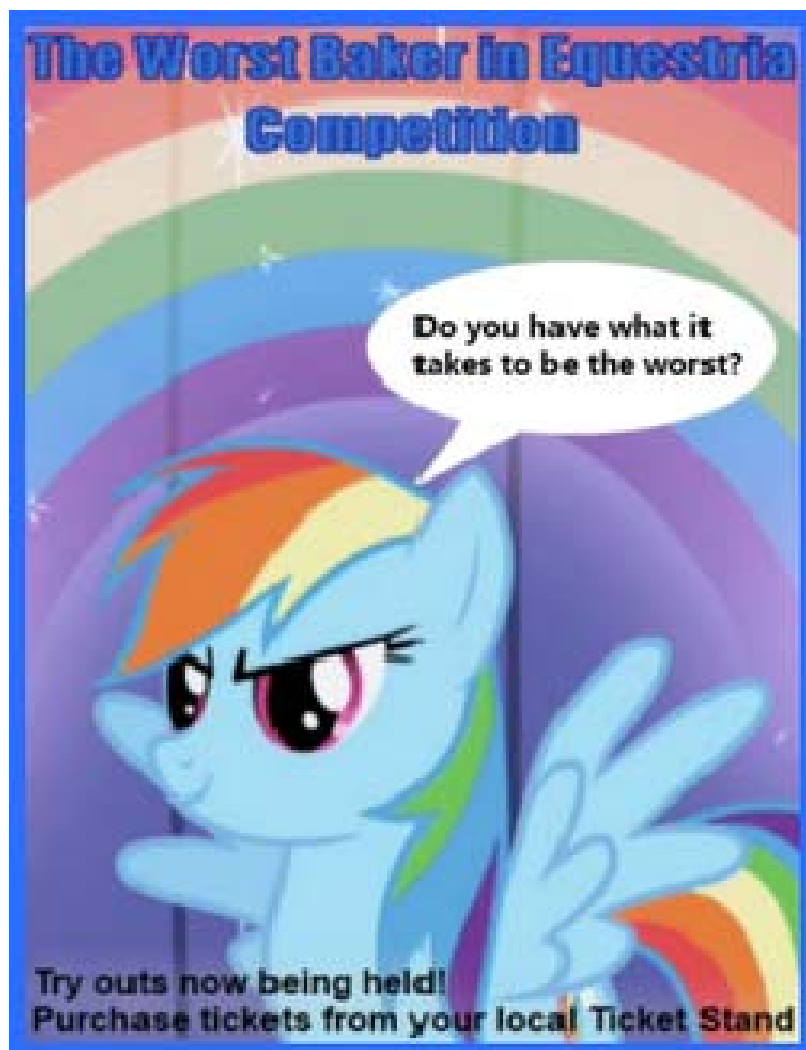


# Worst Bakers in Equestria

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# Table of Contents:

## **~~ Preparations ~~**

Chapter 1	Luna's Soup Adventure	3
Chapter 2	Breakfast for Dinky	19
Chapter 3	Rainbow Dash's Training	27
Chapter 4	The G&PT's Terrible Day	44

## **~~ Preliminaries ~~**

Chapter 1	All Work and No Sleep	63
	Make Luna Drink Coffee	
Chapter 2	The Best Announcers Ever!	74
Chapter 3	Trixie Bakes	85
	in a Story About Baking	
Chapter 4	I'm a Sidekick!	92
Chapter 5	When the Plot Begins to Thicken,	100
	Reduce Heat and Continue to Stir	
Chapter 6	We Haven't Got a Clue	110
Intermission	The Intermissioning	117
Chapter 7	You Have Fallen Into My Trap:	121
	The Musical	
Chapter 8	Let's Wrap This Up	139
	In Ten Paragraphs Flat	
Chapter 9	Above All Else, Be Happy	140
Chapter 10	This Ending Makes About	150
	as Much Sense as Anything	
	Else That Has Happened Today	

# Preparations

## Chapter 1

### Luna's Soup Adventure

Princess Luna smiled happily as she walked through Canterlot's shopping district. It was late afternoon and the lunch rush had changed into a dinner rush with no signs of slowing down. All around Luna were ponies buying, selling, trading, browsing, bartering, yelling, smiling, eating, performing and talking. In a word: commerce. Things had changed so much in the past thousand years. Some changes would take some getting used to, but this district with its sea of ponies? This was amazing. Daily social interactions on a scale that boggled Luna's mind. The best part was that it never stopped. Day or night, rain or shine, summer or winter, it didn't matter. The shopping district was always open.

Luna had left the palace earlier seeking adventure. More accurately, Luna had snuck out of the palace earlier seeking adventure. The royal guards and her sister probably still thought she was resting in her room. Luna was careful though. The Moon Princess casually walking about Canterlot would have caused quite a stir. News of it would have quickly reached the royal palace and, from there, her sister's ears. For this reason, Luna had created a magical disguise for herself. To everypony seeing her, Luna appeared to be an earth pony with a light brown coat, dark orange mane and a pile of coffee beans for a cutie mark. She called this disguise 'Morning Dew'. The name and cutie mark a tribute to the beverage that allowed her to remain awake and alert during most of her daytime adventures. Her horn and wings still existed but were invisible. She had to be alert though, lest somepony bump into something that shouldn't be there. It was always awkward when that happened.

Illusionary magic came naturally to Luna. Disguises, invisibility, ventriloquism; she could cast spells like these quickly and so subtlety that

no one could tell what was real and what wasn't. No one except her sister that was. Celestia always seemed to see through her illusions with ease. Not through magic but through intuition that could only come from being an older sister. That had sometimes made sneaking out a challenge. It was a wonder that Luna hadn't been caught yet.

Luna sometimes felt guilty going on her adventures but, except for raising the moon and a few hours of the Lunar Court, she didn't really have any responsibilities. Her sister was always finding something or another to busy herself with. Luna had offered to help after her return. Was eager to help. However, after a few blunders, it became apparent that her 'helping' was anything but. Luna had become discouraged for a time but her sister was there for her. Celestia had suggested that Luna take a break, temporarily close her Court, see the world, talk to her subjects, learn and, above all else, be happy. And so she had.

Luna had spent weeks reading in the royal library. She went on official visits both with and without her sister. She had even attended Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns for a time but had left after she felt she was intimidating the younger students. She was also failing chemistry but nopony needed to know that.

Luna had always felt the best way to learn was by doing. But everywhere she went, she was 'Princess' Luna and princesses did not paint walls, or wait tables, or dig ditches; that tended to make the other ponies doing the job nervous. So she had begun sneaking out in disguise to experience Equestria as a citizen instead of a ruler. She tried her hoof at any and every job she could, changing her appearance and pony type as needed. Some learning experiences went well. Some required a lot of apologizing. Once she had to flee from an angry mob. In the end, simply learning about her subjects helped immensely when she reopened her Lunar Court.

Today had turned out to be better than expected. Luna had come to observe the ponies of the market and scout out any potential 'help wanted' signs for future adventures. She soon became caught up in the hustle and bustle around her and became eager to make some purchases of her own. The first sale went easy. Luna had found a necklace she liked and bought it. The second sale didn't go as well. Rather than pay the asking price, Luna had tried haggling. She had seen many ponies do it and understood

the theory behind it. But theory often differs from practice and something had gone wrong. Luna was sure haggling was supposed to reduce the price, not increase it. She had ended up paying nearly double the asking price for the scarf that was in the bag held by her mouth. It was a beautiful scarf though and would look wonderful on her. Now that she thought about it, why did she buy a scarf anyway? It was summer and would be months before wearing a scarf wouldn't draw strange stares. Luna decided to chalk the whole thing up as a learning experience.

Luna was beginning to grow hungry. She could find something to eat here but her evening meal with her sister would start shortly after sundown. It would be suspicious if Luna wasn't hungry at what was supposed to normally be her 'breakfast'. She would have to return to the palace to eat. Luna smiled. A savvy shopper would never turn down a free meal anyways.

As Luna was turning down the street that would take her to the palace, she noticed a unicorn stallion hanging a brightly colored poster with 'The Worst Baker in Equestria Competition' written along the top. Most of the poster was taken up by a picture of a cyan pegasus mare with a rainbow mane. Luna recognized her as Rainbow Dash, the bearer of the Element of Loyalty. A word bubble was coming from Rainbow Dash's mouth that asked, 'Do you have what it takes to be the worst?'. Along the bottom of the poster was the date and location of the competition, where to purchase tickets and where tryouts were being held.

"Excuse me, sir," Luna said, after the pony had finished smoothing out the poster. "What is this Worst Baker Competition?"

"You never heard of the WBE's?" the unicorn asked, then chuckled. "You must be living under a rock."

Luna laughed nervously. "Not anymore. And it wasn't exactly under," she replied.

The unicorn looked briefly confused then continued. "The WBE's are a yearly baking competition with a twist. It's all about baking badly. Making a mess, setting things on fire, creating inedible food; that sort of thing. It's great entertainment. You're missing out if you haven't seen them at least once. This year's competition is in Ponyville, so it shouldn't take too long to get there."

The gears began to turn in Luna's head. "What if..." Luna began, she wasn't sure if this was a good idea but it sounded interesting, fun even. "What if I wanted to enter the competition?"

"Well, the first thing you need to do is make sure you bake bad. And I mean real bad. You can't just mess up a recipe from time to time, you have to have a complete inability to bake at all if you want to even reach the quarter finals. You'll have to go to a tryout to be admitted. The WBE's have gotten real popular and would go on for days if the tryouts didn't narrow it down to the top 100. After that it's the preliminaries the morning of the competition where it's further reduced to the top 8. Then the actual event starts that evening where the worst bakers compete in front of an audience of thousands. The winner is crowned champion, given a trophy and invited back to compete the next year. But the real prize is getting free food for an entire year from the restaurant of your choice."

Luna was liking this more and more. She had never entered a competition before. Performing in front of an audience would be an excellent learning experience. "Thank you for the information. I'll have to think about this."

"My pleasure, miss. The tryouts will run until the day before the competition. I hear it's easier to get a spot if you go earlier rather than later."

Luna began to trot towards the palace. She had never baked before. In fact, she had never cooked anything for herself before. She would have to find out if she had this inability to bake or not.

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As much as Luna hated to admit it, sneaking into the royal palace was easy. True, the royal guards patrolled the ground, sky and interior of the palace in constantly changing patrol routes and shifts. The palace was also warded with runes that would glow and hum if they detected any teleportation or invisibility spell used nearby. Even the ground under the palace was magically hardened so that not even a diamond dog could dig its way through. There was one flaw in the defenses though; they were never designed with the thought of an invisible alicorn flying in.

Luna landed on her room's balcony and walked in through the open door. The rune above the door should have alerted everypony nearby that an invisible intruder had entered the princess's bedroom, but long ago Luna had tweaked the spell on it to be unable to detect her own magic. This had the side effect of making the rune no longer able to detect any magic at all. Still, giving invisible assassins access to her room was a small price to pay for an easy way to sneak out.

Sleeping in Luna's bed was a pony that looked just like her. At least that's what any one would see if they happened to peak through her door. In truth it was just an illusion she had created before leaving a few hours ago. She was only slightly worried that this spell was becoming second nature to her. Luna made sure no guards were flying by before dispelling the illusion and reappearing as herself. Luna dropped her bag and levitated out her necklace and scarf. It was a shame she wouldn't be able to wear these about the palace for awhile. She would have to pretend to purchase them the next time she left the palace 'officially'. Luna put her purchases away and put on her royal ensemble. Now that she had 'woken up' from her rest, Luna was free to move about the palace with no pony being the wiser to her earlier activities.

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Luna made her way to the kitchens. It was about an hour until sundown. She would be joining her sister for their evening meal at that time. She pushed open the kitchen doors with her magic and walked inside. It was no surprise to Luna that the kitchens were in a state of controlled chaos. The royal chefs were always busy making meals not only for the princesses, but for the guards and palace staff as well. The kitchen was filled with unicorns, pegasi and earth ponies all preparing food in various states of assembly. All of the ponies were wearing white toques and jackets. Pots were boiling, pans were flipping their contents, flames leapt from the stoves, wonderful smells filled the air, and, above all else, was the noise. The chefs were talking, laughing and shouting orders over sounds of cooking and one another. Luna couldn't understand half of what was being said yet, somehow, it all came together. Meals were prepared and sent out. Dishes came back and were cleaned. Everypony ate their meals and returned to their jobs satisfied.

One chef was louder than the rest. Luna recognized the unicorn. He was the Head Chef of the day kitchen, Main Course. He hurried about the kitchen tasting food, giving orders and keeping everything running. As Main Course finished approving one of his chef's dishes, he turned and took notice of Luna. He quickly approached her.

"Princess Luna," he said, bowing his head, "it is an honor that you would grace my kitchen with your presence."

Luna bowed her head to match Main Course. While she may be the co-ruler of Equestria, Main Course could be considered the ruler of the day kitchen, and she would respect that. Main Course's face was full of gratitude as he smiled.

"We were just about to begin Princess Celestia and your evening meals. Did you have a special request? No need to be shy. We would enjoy making anything for you."

"As a matter of fact. I do have a request. Though I admit it may be a little strange."

"Strange? The chefs of the day kitchen don't know the meaning of strange. We have prepared culinary masterpieces from every corner of Equestria. We are not afraid to try any recipe. Use any ingredient. Ask, and it shall be made."

"The thing is, it isn't a recipe it's... well..." Luna took a breath and fixed her eyes on Main Course's. "Head Chef Main Course, may I make something in your kitchen?"

Main Course was stunned for a moment, then his smile grew even larger. "Princess Luna, of course you may cook in my kitchen. Come with me, come with me. We'll find you an open station. I will assist you personally so that your food will be just as good, no, better than anything ever made with these walls."

"But will the kitchen be able to run without you? I'm sure I can manage on my own." Luna said as she was lead down an aisle of chefs cooking at their stations. The other chefs had begun to notice her and were all bowing their respects.



“My sous-chef can handle everything on her own for the last few hours. Ah, here we are.”

Main Course directed Luna to an open station at the end of the aisle. The station was equipped with a cutting board, knife block, stove and oven. There were also many drawers and cabinets that likely housed everything else that could be needed. Luna noticed it was also considerably less noisy at this end of the kitchen. Though, that may simply be because of her presence.

“I am sure you are ready to jump in and create the most extravagant dish you can imagine, but may I suggest you start with something basic?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Soup. It may seem boring but there are a near infinite possible combination of ingredients that can be used to make soup. Not only that, but no two chefs make the same soup the same way. You can tell a lot about a pony by how they make their soup.”

Luna laughed. “Then I shall make soup and see what it says about me.”

Main Course’s horn began to glow and a pot floated out of an opening cabinet. He set the pot on the counter top. “Now then, every soup begins with some type of liquid. We have many different types of vegetable stocks in storage but, for your first soup, I suggest you begin with water. It will allow you to more easily taste how each new ingredient combines their flavors to change your soup. If you’ll be so kind to carry your pot, I will show you to the sink.”

Main Course walked around the end of the aisle and turn towards the sink on the far wall. Luna began to grab the pot with her magic but stopped. Would magic even be allowed in the competition? Most likely not, it would give unicorns an unfair advantage. If she was going to do this, it would have to be without the help of magic.

Main Course reached the sink and turned around to continue his instructions to Luna. He opened his mouth to speak but his voice caught in

his throat. The Princess was walked towards him with the pot dangling by the handle from her mouth.

“P-princess, you don’t have to carry the pot that way,” Main Course said as he regained his ability to speak, “It is unbecoming. You have magic after all.”

Luna set the pot down on a counter top. She could see out of the corner of her eye that many of the chefs had stopped what they were doing to watch her. “I’m sorry, Main Course, but I forgot to mention. I would like to do this without using my magic. You have so many pegasi and earth ponies on your staff and they all make such wonderful food. I felt I could appreciate it more if I understood the extra effort that they had to put into it.”

Many of the pegasi and earth ponies smiled and nodded in agreement. A quick glance from Main Course and the kitchen went back to its usual busy state. Main Course looked at the determined expression on the Princesses face and knew he wouldn’t be able to win this argument. “Very well, Princess,” he relented. “Please place the pot in the sink and fill it halfway full of water.”

Luna placed the pot in the sink and twisted the hot water handle; only to have it snap off in her hoof. Luna and Main Course stared at the handle as water poured from the faucet. Luna started to speak but Main Course cut her off. “It is not your fault Princess. Allow me to reattach that for you. I will just put it back on... like... no. Hmm... it appears to be a clean break in the metal. Well, no matter.”

Main Course opened the cabinet beneath the sink and levitated a pair of pliers. He attached the pliers to the metal stub of the broken handle and twisted. The water shut off.

“There we are. Always be prepared. Would someone call for maintenance? Thank you. Now, Princess Luna. You will have to empty out your excess water. The pot will also be too heavy for your mouth so you’ll have to use this serving cart to take it back to your station,” Main Course said as he pulling the serving cart towards them with his magic.

Luna carefully lifted her pot and placed it on the serving cart. As she moved back to her station, she pondered the odd occurrence. She had felt... something, as the handle had snapped in two. Some type of force at work. None of the other chefs, even the unicorns, seemed to have noticed anything. She would have to keep alert and try to sense it again.

With Luna's pot of water back on her stove without further incident, Main Course continued his training. "Now for the important question. What type of soup would you like to make?"

Luna thought about the many types of soup she had tried before. "I think... that I would like to try making tomato soup."

"An excellent choice. I will fetch a basket of tomatoes for you. In the meantime, turn the stove's heat to high and select a medium sized knife."

As Main Course left to get the tomatoes, Luna set the stove to high. She had no idea what counted as a medium sized knife, so she pulled out the knife from the middle of the knife block. As she turned back to her stove, she dropped her knife onto the counter top. Her pot was on fire. Correction; her water was on fire. Luna stared at the flames dancing along the water's surface. There were ways both magical and mundane for fire to exist on top of water but Luna couldn't think of any that applied to this situation. Her trance was broken by a basket of tomatoes dropping onto her counter top and a lid slamming on the pot.

"Princess Luna! Are you all right?" Main Course said in a slight panic. "I know you are eager but you must wait and follow my instructions. What was it that you added to the soup?"

"What? Nothing. I just turned on the stove like you said."

Main Course chuckled as he removed the lid. "Come now Princess, a pot of water doesn't just catch on fire on its own. Now let us see..."

Main Course looked at the pot of water. It hadn't even started to boil yet. He levitated a spoon to scoop out some water, blew on it to cool it off and tasted it. A look of confusion crossed his face. "It's only water," he said in disbelief.

"I told you."

"Yes, forgive me Princess. It's just that..." Main Course blinked a few times then stared at Luna nervously. "Princess, I'm terribly sorry if this sounds rude but... A-are... are you by chance... pranking me?"

"What?" Luna asked, eyes widening. Main Course continued to stare at Luna. "Don't give me that look. You should know full well that I am not a prankster."

"Yes, of course Princess. I-it is just bad luck. Could happen to anypony. Lets forget about it and continue. Just take your knife and cut each tomato up as small as you can. Do not worry about your technique we can work on proper knife skills another time."

Luna selected a tomato from the basket and placed it on the center of her cutting board. She bit onto the handle of her knife, held the tomato between her hooves and lowered the knife into the tomato. A stream of juice squirted out of the tomato and into Luna's eye.

Main Course gasped. "Let me get you a wash cloth, Princess. I am so sorry, I have never seen that happened before, I-"

"It's fine," Luna said, wiping juice from her eye. "Just bad luck, could happen to anypony."

Luna cut the tomato into small pieces and added it to the pot of water. When she pierced the next tomato, it popped like a balloon with an audible bang. Pieces of tomato showered on Luna and the stations around her. By now, the other chefs had begun to grow nervous. Something was going wrong. Main Course looked to be on the verge of fainting. Luna, however, was smiling. That force she had sensed was back.

This had to be it. This was the inability to cook that poster pony was talking about earlier. No matter what she did, this soup would turn out horrible. She would go to the tryouts tomorrow, maybe even get a spot. Luna knew she should stop. She had the confirmation she needed. She should apologize to Main Course, play the whole thing off as bad luck and laugh about it. But she couldn't. She had to see the end results.

With a fiery determination, Luna attacked the remaining tomatoes. The tomatoes fought back, sending juice and pulp everywhere. The chefs around Luna began to cower away; their dishes becoming increasingly tomato flavored. Main Course tried to speak several times, his mouth opening and closing but no words coming out.

Luna shouted a battle cry as she plunged her knife into the last tomato. It had fought valiantly but fell like all the rest. With a scoop and flick of her knife, the last of the tomatoes plunged into the bubbling pot. Luna took the wash cloth from Main Course and wiped the tomato from her face and mane.

“What’s next?” Luna asked eagerly.

Main Course’s eyes blinked and he shook his head before regaining his composure. “Next...? Yes, next. Next you need to reduce the heat so that the soup will come down to a simmer. Stir the soup with a ladle and, when it is mostly combined, give it a taste.”

Luna complied with the instructions. She ladled a small amount of soup into a saucer and gave it a taste. She let herself experience the flavors before swallowing. “It tastes like tomatoes and water,” she said to Main Course.

“Good, good. I would be worried if it tasted like anything else. Now we need some seasonings. I recommend starting with salt. Just add a little, stir and taste. Repeat until you reach your desired level of saltiness.”

Main Course levitated a shaker of salt to Luna, making sure the top was securely fastened. Luna added a few shakes of salt to her soup, stirred, ladled and tasted. Her face scrunched up in displeasure. “It’s way too salty now,” Luna said.

“You probably just need to stir more. Some of the salt must have gotten stuck to the ladle.”

Luna stirred and tasted again. She coughed as she swallowed. “Ugh, it’s even saltier now.”

"I had no idea you had such a delicate palate for salt, Princess," Main Course said as he levitated a spoon into the soup. "I am sure it could not be all that salty." Main Course put the spoon in his mouth and promptly gagged. He rushed to the sink and began to gulp down water.

When Main Course had recovered, he slowly walked back to Luna. "B-by the Sun and Moon," he swore. "That was the saltiest anything I ever tasted. I would rather eat a spoonful of salt than try that again. Not... that... you should get discouraged. This is your first try after all. There must have just been something wrong with the salt. It... went bad... somehow. I am afraid there is no easy way to fix your soup and it will have to be disposed of. It is getting late. Maybe we can try again tomorrow?"

"No," Luna said smiling. "I think I can still fix it!"

"Princess... please be reasonable. Even magic could not fix your soup."

"I think some cheese will help."

Main Course stared at Luna for a few seconds before turning and walking towards the cooler. Luna watched as her soup burst into flames again.

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"Princess, I beg of you, I plead of you, I beseech you, I am even asking politely. Your soup... it is beyond salvation."

Luna had been working on her soup for the better part of an hour. She was amazed at how bad it was turning out. Adding onions had caused the soup to briefly smell terrible. Adding garlic had produced barking sounds and caused one of the chefs to faint. Simple additions were causing wild reactions in ways that she knew were logically impossible. This atmosphere of bad luck. This aura of inability. Luna knew there was something magical about it but she couldn't locate the source. It didn't come from within like a unicorn's magic but it didn't feel like an external source either. She had to learn about this. She had to enter the competition where she would be surrounded by others with this aura. Luna looked

down and the bubbling green soup. She had to do something about this first.

“Do you think sugar would help?” she asked Main Course, who was sitting on his haunches and had been weeping silently.

Main Course looked up at Luna with haunted eyes. “No, Princess. No I do not.”

Luna looked back at her soup. It would be a shame to just dump it out. Perhaps it could be used as fertilizer? Suddenly, Main Course's eyes focused and he got up. “Princess Luna, are you not forgetting something?” he said with determination. “The moon!”

Luna's eyes widened. “Oh my gosh, you're right! I'm late!”

“Run, Princess! Run and raise the moon! I will look after your... soup.”

Princess Luna lowered her head. Main Course prepared to return the bow but Luna's horn began to glow. Luna slowly raised her head, eyes closed in concentration. When Luna's horn was pointing straight up, it stopped glowing and she opened her eyes.

“There. Moon's up. Thank you for reminding me.”

“I... but...”

“That whole flying in the air, silhouetted by the moon thing is just for show. I can raise the moon from anywhere.”

Main Course could feel his sanity slipping. It was only a matter of time before he started talking to the turnips. But then he saw his salvation walk through the door and he quickly dried his tears. Main Course bowed low and said, “Princess Celestia! Welcome! Thank you so much for coming to my kitchen.”

Princess Celestia walked along the aisle, smiling and nodding to the chefs that were bowing. She stopped before Main Course and bowed to him. “Main Course, it's a pleasure to see you again,” she said.

“The pleasure is all mine. Princess Luna has taken an interest in learning how to cook. It is getting late though and dinner will be ready soon. Perhaps you could take her with you to the dining room and I will be there shortly to serve you?” Main Course smiled his biggest smile.

“Good evening, Luna,” Celestia said.

“Good evening, Sister,” Luna replied.

“That is an interesting pot of soup.”

“Yes, it seems I have a complete inability to bake,” Luna announced happily.

Celestia laughed warmly. “Well I should think not. After all, you’re cooking, not baking.”

Luna froze. How could she have been this stupid? It was called the Worst Baker in Equestria Competition. Soup wasn’t baking. Pies, cakes, cookies; those were baking.

“Still, I can’t wait to try your soup.”

Luna would have froze again if she wasn’t still frozen.

“T-try my soup? You want to taste it? With your mouth?”

“Of course. It looks like you worked so hard on it. It deserves at least a little taste, don’t you think?”

Luna did not think so but instead said, “I suppose just a bite won’t kill us. It’ll be just a few more minutes. I’ll join you at our table.”

Princess Celestia smiled and began walking out of the kitchen. Main Course watched his salvation leave. When Celestia had left, Luna quickly said, “Is there a way to bake soup?”

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Luna and Celestia were seated at their personal dining table. The walls were adorned with tapestries and flowers. A balcony to the east allowed the sisters to see either the rising moon or sun during the two meals a day that they shared together. The table was filled with delicious looking food. A house salad with extra tomatoes, daffodil and tomato sandwiches and, for dessert, a strawberry and tomato pie. Also on the table where two plates that each contained a solid rectangle of green 'soup'.

Luna had been unable to get a response from Main Course, who had just stood in the aisle, smiling and staring at nothing. She had decided to stick the entire pot of soup in the oven for a few minutes to see what happened. The oven was now beyond repair. That had seemed like a good time to take what remained of her soup and leave. While she couldn't actually be banned from the kitchen, the pleading looks on the chef's faces told Luna all she needed to know. Today, the chefs of the day kitchen could say they learned the meaning of 'strange'.

"Well," Celestia said. "It seems like the chefs were a little tomato happy tonight. At least your soup is something different. I'm not sure if it can still be called soup though."

"Actually. It's tomato soup."

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence as Celestia took that information in.

"Oh," was all Celestia said.

"We don't have to- make that, probably shouldn't eat it."

"Does it taste bad?"

"Ye- actually... I'm not sure. I stopped tasting it once it turned green. It didn't taste very good before that though."

"We should at least have a nibble. I admit, I am a little curious what it tastes like."

The princesses levitated their knives and forks, cut off small chunks of their bars, raised the small chunks to their mouths and, after a moments

hesitation, bit on the chunks and began to chew. Both princesses then raised their napkins to their mouths and politely spat out the soup.

Luna spat into her napkin several times, making sure the soup was all gone. She was the first to speak. "That... wasn't food. It tasted more like..."

"Soap?"

"Yes, exactly!" Luna giggled. "It seems I mixed up a letter somewhere along the way."

Celestia laughed too. "It actually has a pleasant fragrance though. Perhaps we should try bathing with it?"

"Careful. It might turn your coat green."

Both sisters laughed and started eating their real food. Tomorrow, Luna would have to see if she was as bad at baking as she was at making soup. She would also have to find a new kitchen to use. But, for now, she would just talk and laugh with her sister as they enjoyed each other's company.

# Chapter 2

## Breakfast for Dinky

One morning, about an hour before dawn, Ditzzy Doo's alarm clock went off. The alarm, however, failed to wake Ditzzy up. This was because her alarm clock was so damaged that it no longer rang. Instead, it merely vibrated on Ditzzy's night stand for several minutes before falling off. On any normal day, this would have been the end of gray pegasus' pre-morning routine and she would have awakened with the rising sun an hour later. Today, however, was not a normal day. Today was the second Sunday of the month. Today was the day that Ditzzy would make breakfast for Dinky.

Ditzzy never missed a 'Second Sunday' breakfast. For this reason, she had modified her alarm clock. Most ponies, when confronted with a broken alarm clock, would say, *'This alarm clock is broken. I must either have it fixed or replaced.'* Ditzzy, however, had a unique way of thinking. Instead, when she looked at her broken alarm clock she said, *'This alarm clock no longer wakes me up. I must change the way it functions so that it will continue to wake me up.'* This is why when Ditzzy's alarm clock fell from the night stand it did not land on the floor, but instead hung in the air. Her alarm clock was tied to a string that was tied to Ditzzy's tail that was attached to Ditzzy who was asleep in a hammock that was suspended across her room. Ditzzy always enjoyed having some space between her resting place and the ground. It may not have been a cloud but it was still comfortable. The alarm clock dangled in the air like a pendulum, vibrating silently. With the extra weight on her tail, Ditzzy's subconscious had her roll over. When that failed to produce any meaningful results, Ditzzy rolled over again and ran out of hammock to roll over in. With a crash, Ditzzy landed on her alarm clock, turning it off.

Ditzzy cracked open her eyes and tried to figure out why her bed was suddenly so uncomfortable. One of her eyes focused on her night stand, making her wonder how it had gotten on the ceiling. Her other eye looked at her door, hammock, window and floor; making her realize that she had

fallen from her bed again, that the lump under her was her alarm clock and that she had better get up now if she was going to make breakfast before Dinky woke up.

Ditzy's eyes opened completely. Most breakfasts Dinky ate were already made meals purchased from a store, like a muffin; or food that required no preparation at all, like an apple. But Ditzy knew that mothers were supposed to cook for their children. There were, after all, magazine articles about it. Ditzy, however, had a problem. As much as she hated to admit it, she was no good at baking. Anything she did involving dough, ovens or baking trays turned out horribly wrong. Even finished baked goods had a tendency to behave oddly if she spent too much time near them and not enough time eating them. Dinky loved baked goods, especially for breakfast. So Ditzy would bake and hope she could make at least some of it edible.

Ditzy untangled her legs from her wings, untied the string on her tail and set her alarm clock back on her nightstand. She quietly opened her door and stepped out into the hallway. From there she made her way to Dinky's room and, ever so quietly, opened the door. The little purple unicorn filly was still asleep in her bed, hooves clutching her stuffed teddy urso. Ditzy smiled and watched her daughter sleep for a few moments before she returned to the hall and gently shut the door. She walked into her kitchen and surveyed it. This would be a battle. A battle she couldn't lose. A battle she dared not think of losing. From now until Dinky awoke, Ditzy would fight on for her daughter's breakfast. The enemy was her own inability to bake. She closed her eyes and breathed deep. When she had calmed herself, she stepped onto the battlefield.

Simple measures had to be made first before tackling the bigger obstacles. From the cupboard, Ditzy grabbed a plate with a smiling face drawn on it and set it on the kitchen table. That plate was Dinky's favorite. Utensils were found and set out. Ditzy could never remember which side of the plate each utensil was supposed to go on, so she made a circle of them around the plate instead. Next, a backup plan had to be found and secured in case of disaster. She walked to the pantry doors and slid them open, spotting two new boxes of cereal within. She grabbed a box and, with a flick of her neck, sent it flying towards the kitchen table. Accuracy was unnecessary at this stage. She repeated this with the second box, ignoring the crunch it made as it slammed against the far wall. Ditzy looked at the

fruit basket hanging next to the refrigerator. It was, as expected, full of fruit. She grabbed more fruit than her hooves could carry and flew towards the counter top. She dropped a banana and a grapefruit along the way. Acceptable losses. With the fruit and cereal backup plan in place, Ditzzy prepared for the battle's real challenge: baking.

Pancakes. Everypony loved pancakes. Dinky especially. Ditzzy grabbed the necessary ingredients and placed them on the counter next to the fruit. Bowls, spoons, pan and spatula were placed in a pile. She was ready. With a determined look, Ditzzy began her attack.

Eggs first. From the refrigerator they came. Holding the egg in her mouth, Ditzzy carefully rapped it against the side of the bowl. The egg shell shattered out the back instead of the front, filling Ditzzy's mouth. She fought against gagging and spat the egg into the trash. The enemy had made itself known. Ditzzy grabbed another egg. She knew another approach would have to be taken. This time she spat out the egg towards the rim of the bowl. It struck perfectly and cracked in two. The enemy was one step ahead though and, instead of raw egg like expected, a baby chicken popped out. The chick walked around the bowl, peeping, then looked up towards the gray pegasus. Ditzzy wasn't mad at the chick. It was, ultimately, just an unwitting agent of the enemy. It could be considered a miracle that the chick had even survived its trip from farm to store to refrigerator to bowl. On any other day, Ditzzy would have named the chick Peeps and raised it as a pet, but today was serious.

The bowl with the chick was moved to the side and a new bowl procured. Ditzzy tried again and again to crack open the eggs. Hoof strikes, knife strikes, air drops; any method was used to remove the shells. After a few minutes, she had a bowl full of raw eggs, a small amount of egg shell and, thankfully, no more baby chickens. Ditzzy had heard from a wise pony that you shouldn't keep all of your eggs in one basket. Taking that statement to a further conclusion, she realized that you shouldn't keep all your opened eggs in one bowl either. She poured half of her egg mixture into a redundant bowl and set it next to the chick's bowl. Ditzzy was ready for for the next step.

Flour, baking soda, milk, salt, sugar, butter; the rest of the ingredients were added to the bowl and stirred to combine. Ditzzy was getting worried. The enemy hadn't shown up in a while. She knew it was waiting; watching

for the perfect opportunity. She placed a large pan on the stove and turned on the heat. When the pan was hot, Ditzzy spooned the batter in, forming three circles. She grasped the spatula in her mouth and waited. After a few minutes of listening to the pancakes sizzle, she flipped them onto their other side. The pancakes were perfectly browned. Ditzzy glanced around her kitchen nervously. The enemy would be striking soon. Ditzzy just had to find out where and be re- there! The bread box had been pushed too close to the edge when she had moved her bowl and was starting to fall. Ditzzy spat out the spatula and rushed towards the bread box as it tilted over the edge. She dove forward, using her wings to propel herself faster. The enemy would not have the bread.

Ditzzy learned that diving forward and using her wings for extra speed was a great way to cover distance fast, however, it was unnecessary when she was only three feet away from the object she was diving for. Her entire kitchen shook as she crashed into a cabinet and broke it's hinges. The bread box landed next to her with a thump and opened.

Ditzzy shook her head and tried to clear away the tweeting birds. She had little success until she realized the tweeting birds was actually the peeping chick on the counter top above. She looked at the bread box and saw that it, and the bread inside, was completely undamaged. She smiled at her good fortune. This appeared to be a sign. A sign that toast should be included with Dinky's breakfast. Ditzzy moved the bread box back to its place on the counter top and stuck her muzzle inside of it. It was then that she smelled the smoke. Ditzzy knew that she hadn't purchased smoke scented bread, so that left three possible reasons for the smell. Ditzzy grabbed a mouthful of bread slices, crammed them into her toaster and pressed down on the lever. She turned her head and discovered the smoke smell was coming from reason number two; her pancakes were on fire.

A distraction. The enemy hadn't attacked the bread, but had used it to get Ditzzy to turn her back. A costly mistake on her part. She quickly bit onto the pan's handle, dumped the whole thing into the sink and turned on the water. After a few seconds, the fire was out and she shut off the water. Ditzzy mourned the loss of her pancakes. They had been potentially edible. Now they were charred black on one half, raw dough in the middle, and a soggy mess everywhere else. Ditzzy was about to try again with the rest of her batter, when she heard the sound of shattering glass. She turned and saw that a drinking glass that had been knocked over from her earlier crash

had rolled out of the cupboard, fell and broke apart in the rest of her batter. Broken eggshells, while unwanted, were edible. Broken glass? Not so much.

Ditzy again smelled smoke. She pushed her toaster into the sink and turned on the water. It was then that Ditzy remembered another of life's lessons involving water and electricity. Ditzy mourned the loss of her toaster. It had been a brave little toaster, always toasting things. This toaster had lasted a week longer than the last one. Ditzy was not discouraged though. She still had the rest of the bread, the redundant bowl of eggs, and a baby chick. One of her eyes wandered over to the chick's bowl and saw that it had escaped somewhere into her home. Loses were high this morning but Ditzy would not surrender. Dinky would have her homemade breakfast.

Ditzy placed a plate of bread into the microwave. Toasters cooked things. Microwaves also cooked things. Ergo, microwaves could make toast. There wasn't a toast setting on the microwave, so Ditzy set it for ten minutes. She would have to keep one of her eyes on it to know when it was done. With the toast cooking, Ditzy turned back to the bowl of eggs. She could try making pancakes again but the enemy would be expecting that. Instead, Ditzy would make the perfect baked good: the muffin.

Ditzy had once made a list of the reasons in which muffins were the perfect food. Three hundred reasons to be precise. They were all a variation of one simple fact: muffins were delicious. Ditzy's homemade muffins, however, were hard to classify as muffins. The word 'muffinesque' would even be a stretch. But that was the idea. There was one way to trick the enemy. If she didn't know if she was baking then neither would the enemy. Ditzy turned on the oven, closed her eyes and set about her work. She knew her kitchen like the back of her hoof, after all.

Ditzy found a bag of what was possibly flour and poured it into the bowl that was possibly full of eggs. Ditzy continued blindly grabbing ingredients and adding them to her bowl. When she was certain the bowl contained enough stuff, she bit onto a large wooden spoon and began stirring. After a minute, the spoon would no longer stir. Ditzy opened her eyes. One eye looked at the obviously defective spoon. Her other eye looked at the empty bag of potato chips, the half full bottle of soda, the block of cheese and the other ad-libbed ingredients. Ditzy looked at the

back of her hoof in confusion. It was too late to try again. Dinky would be waking up soon.

The microwave dinged, reminding Ditzzy that she couldn't keep an eye on something when they were both closed. She looked at the burning toast within. Into the sink the plate went. Ditzzy was beginning to grow nervous. The backup plan might have to be initiated. She opened her oven and placed the bowl of what might have passed for batter inside. After a few seconds of thought, Ditzzy tossed some slices of bread in with it and shut the door.

Cereal, when poured by some pony that was desperate, counted as a homemade breakfast. Ditzzy rushed to the boxes of cereal she had tossed earlier and placed them on the table. She opened box number one, revealing a bag full of toys. Something must have gone wrong at the packaging center. Dinky would love the toys but she couldn't eat them, seeing as they were made of inedible plastic as well as being a choking hazard. Box number two was opened and the contents made Ditzzy frown. The cereal inside had been reduced to a fine powder. Somepony had been careless with handling this box. With cereal out of the equation, Ditzzy turned to her fruit.

It was at this point in Ditzzy's frantic kitchen warfare that the law of probabilities caught up with her. The grapefruit, ignored until now, had earlier landed in precisely the correct location that Ditzzy, who was now distraught and not looking down, stepped on it with her rear hoof. Physics took over as the gray pegasus' hoof slipped out from under her. Her forward momentum combined with her now oddly angled hind leg caused her to flip backwards. The grapefruit was launched forward and bounced off a cabinet. Ditzzy, now upside down and falling, landed on her back and her head landed on something thankfully softer than her tile floor. The impact with the cabinet had split the grapefruit in two. One half sailed over Ditzzy and towards the kitchen table. The other half landed in her face. Ditzzy closed one eye as grapefruit juice stung it. Her other eye watched a banana, sent flying from when her head landed on it, hit the wall next to the kitchen table. The banana's skin split open when it smacked into the wall and sent the fruit inside flying in the opposite direction. The banana and grapefruit then collided in midair and fell, landing on the plate Ditzzy had set out earlier.



The kitchen was quiet for a long time. When what had just happened finally sunk into Ditzzy's head, she started to smile. The enemy would be furious. The enemy made little differentiation on what it attacked once Ditzzy started baking. Fruit, cereal, bread boxes; anything was fair game once her inability to bake started happening. But the smiling plate was different. That was Dinky's plate. Once food was placed on that plate, it was on sacred grounds and no longer part of the battle. Dinky would at least have fruit for breakfast and maybe even something more.

The muffins were close to being done. Ditzzy looked through the glass window on the oven. The batter had expanded greatly and was a nice golden brown. Even the toast looked good. The enemy must have given up once she had succeeded with the fruit. A ding from the oven timer let Ditzzy know that the 'muffin' was ready. She bit into a mouth mitt and pulled open the oven's door.

Suddenly, Ditzzy was on her back again. Her head was throbbing and her ears were ringing. She slowly opened her eyes and saw that the world looked a whole lot blurrier and much more upside down than normal. She tried to make sense of what had happened but her mind was operating slowly. Something smacked into the floor near her head. One of her eyes looked to see what it was and saw a pile of brown crumbs. The other eye looked up and saw small brown objects fly past every couple seconds. Ditzzy's senses were slowly coming back together. The enemy. It had launched one final assault when she had let her guard down. She rolled onto her side and turned her head towards the oven. The bowl of muffins had spilled over and little lumps of it were flying out. The toast surrounding the bowl was on fire. It reminded Ditzzy of the time when she had found out why popcorn had to be cooked with a cover. The toast hadn't fared well that day either. Had she accidentally added popcorn to the muffin mix?

Then a sound came from down the hall. Even in the noise of the enemy's attack, Ditzzy knew what it was. It was a soft sound that a pony could only recognize by hearing it most every day for years. Dinky had woken up. Her first stop would be the bathroom and from there, the kitchen. Ditzzy only had mere minutes to fix this.

Ditzzy got up. Her body didn't want to move but she didn't care. She was going to end this now. Ditzzy moved toward the oven. The enemy was angry. It didn't like her to succeed. Again and again the lumps of muffin

shot out of the oven; again and again Ditzzy moved just before they hit her. Dinky was awake now. She would have her breakfast. There was nothing the enemy could do. Ditzzy reached the oven, placed her hooves on the door and began to lift it. There was one lump of the muffin batter left in the bowl. It was shaped somewhat like a muffin. It was golden brown. It was waiting for Ditzzy. It sprang out at her. Ditzzy quickly bit down, slammed the oven door and turned it off. She calmly walked to Dinky's plate and set the muffin on it. She tasted the crumbs left in her mouth. The muffin wasn't delicious, but it wasn't bad either.

Ditzzy looked at Dinky's plate. Grapefruit, banana, muffin, but something else was needed. She looked around the kitchen and knew what it was. The bread box had a single slice of bread left in it. Ditzzy grabbed the bread and place it on the table next to the plate. She looked at the bread expectantly. After a few seconds, the bread caught on fire and Ditzzy blew it out. She then flipped the toast onto Dinky's plate just as the kitchen door opened.

Dinky walked into the kitchen and yawned. "Good morning, Mommy," she said sleepily.

"Good morning, Muffin."

Dinky giggled at the use of her nickname. Ditzzy pulled out the chair and helped Dinky into it. Dinky looked at her food and turned towards her mother. "Thanks, mommy! You always make the best breakfasts."

Ditzzy nuzzled her daughter, producing more giggles, before letting her eat. Ditzzy smiled as she moved through her kitchen, cleaning as she went. Today's battle was won but the war never ended. Ditzzy looked at the calendar hanging from the refrigerator. A date had been circled to remind her that the Worst Baker in Equestria Competition was at the end of this month. If Ditzzy could win, Dinky would have a years worth of free food. But, even then, the 'Second Sunday' tradition would continue. Some things would always be worth it.

# Chapter 3

## Rainbow Dash's Training

Rainbow Dash soared through the skies above Ponyville. The sun was shining and, thanks to her amazing weather skills, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. All in all, it was a perfect afternoon... to show off. Tucking in her wings, the rainbow-maned pegasus went into a dive. She fell faster and faster until the world was nothing more than a watery blur and she could only hear the wind screaming in her ears. Then, at the last possible moment, she came out of her dive and began to spin and turn and loop. Only quick glances were allowed as she made split second changes in her course to avoid crashing. Gasps of surprise and awe surrounded her instead of the usual yelling and complaining, so she must have been doing something cool. With her momentum finally exhausted, Rainbow Dash stopped in mid air, did a triple back-flip and landed, being sure to strike a cool pose with her wings flared. All around her a small crowd of ponies stamped the ground in applause before going back about their business. When Rainbow Dash was sure no pony was looking, she shook her head to try and get the world to stop spinning, then began to walk towards Sugarcube Corner, only stumbling once.

Sugarcube Corner was easy to spot. The gingerbread house architecture, while being helpful in explaining what the shop sold, did have the tendency to make it stick out. Likely a clever marketing ploy and the reason it was such a popular confectionery store. A new sign was out front that read, 'Taffy Sale! Today only! Buy two pieces and get the third free!'.

As Rainbow Dash approached the store, a thought returned to her. She had once jokingly asked Pinkie Pie if the candy store's roof was actually made from real gingerbread. Pinkie had laughed and told her to take a bite and find out. Rainbow Dash stared at the roof as some ponies walked past her and into the store. No. Not today. She caught the door before it closed and stepped inside.

The store room of Sugarcube Corner was packed with ponies. The shelves were stocked with colorful candies of all shapes and sizes; the most numerous of which was taffy. Rainbow Dash slowly made her way around the shelves and shoppers towards Mrs. Cake, who was behind the sales counter and looking flustered.

"That will be three bits," Mrs. Cake said to the young filly across from her.

The filly placed the money on the counter and scooped up the bag of taffy. "Thanks, Mrs. Cake!" she said before trotting off to enjoy her treat.

Mrs. Cake placed the money in a box and sighed wearily. She looked up at Rainbow Dash walking over and gave her a smile. "Welcome, Rainbow Dash. Are you here for the taffy sale too?"

"What? Oh! No, maybe later," Rainbow Dash said. "Actually, I'm here to see Pinkie. She was supposed to help me with my training this afternoon."

"Sorry dearie, but she's still at Daisy's birthday party," Mrs. Cake said as she glanced at the clock on the wall. "She should be just about finished. I'm sure she wouldn't mind if you waited for her in her room. Just do try to be quiet. Mr. Cake was up all night running the taffy pull."

"Thanks, Mrs. Cake. Will do."

Rainbow Dash walked up the stairs behind Mrs. Cake and kept going until she reached the loft that served as Pinkie's bedroom. It was then that she spotted trouble. There, standing in the middle of the room, was Gummy; the toothless alligator. Gummy always playfully bit those around him but Rainbow Dash was convinced that she must taste better than the average pony, or at least her wings did. The last time she was alone with Gummy, he had clamped onto one of her wings and refused to let go. It took the combined magic of Twilight and Rarity to finally pry his jaw open. Sometimes Rainbow Dash could still feel the gnawing sensation in her wing.

Gummy quickly turned his head towards her, gave a happy squeak and began racing forwards. Rainbow Dash cringed, took a step back then

stopped. Gummy would just follow her back downstairs. She had to come up with a plan.

Rainbow Dash leaped into the air and rolled out of Gummy's path as the little alligator snapped his jaws, barely missing a feather, and slammed into the wall. She quickly looked around the room and knew what she'd have to do. Rainbow Dash landed on the opposite side of the room. She spread out her right wing and slowly fanned it up and down.

"You want a piece of this?" Rainbow dash taunted.

Gummy recovered and began to charge again. Rainbow Dash continued to fan her wing, making sure Gummy's attention was focused on it. At the last possible moment, she turned and lifted her wing up high. Gummy raced past the pegasus and into the open closet. Rainbow Dash shut the door.

"Yes! See you later, alligator!"

The closet door's handle began to slowly turn. Rainbow Dash threw her hooves around the knob and held on tight.

"No way! Pinkie taught you how to open doors?"

Rainbow Dash held onto Pinkie's closet door, deciding what to do next. She could head over to Daisy's party and try to find Pinkie, but if the party had just ended then Pinkie should be back soon. Rainbow Dash knew she was making too much noise and ran the risk of waking up Mr. Cake eventually. Plus it just felt weird standing there holding a door knob. A scratching sound began coming from the other side the door. Having made up her mind, Rainbow Dash headed back down stairs and hoped Gummy would forget about her if he couldn't see her.

Sugarcube Corner's store room was somehow even more packed then when Rainbow Dash had left it. A pair of pegasus ponies were hovering above the crowd, dangling a rope ladder and lifting stranded ponies to safety. Thankfully, the stairs were close to the sales counter so Rainbow Dash didn't have to wade through the ever increasing crowd.

Mrs. Cake finished helping the waiting customers before turning towards Rainbow Dash. "Something wrong, dearie?"

"No, it's just..." Rainbow Dash said, then hesitated. "Gummy is up there and..."

"Oh! Right. Sorry about that. I completely forgot about what happened last time." Mrs. Cake looked at her store room that was quickly approaching critical mass. "I don't think waiting in here is a good idea. I know. You could always wait in the kitchen."

"The kitchen?"

"Yes," Mrs. Cake said, then chuckled. "Maybe you could even try your hoof at baking while in there."

Rainbow Dash laughed. "You do know I'm Equestria's worst baker, right?"

"Oh dearie, you mustn't be so hard on yourself."

"N-no... you don't understand... I literally am Equestria's worst baker. I have a trophy to prove it. Two of them in fact."

"Oh?" Mrs. Cake was suddenly wary of her offer.

"Haven't you heard of the WBE's?"

"The what?"

"The WBE's! The Worst Baker in Equestria Competition! They're next week! Haven't you seen the posters? Or the giant stadium that is being flown in piece by piece outside of Ponyville?"

Mrs. Cake gave Rainbow Dash a nervous grin.

"You really need to get out more, Mrs. Cake. Still, I guess it'd be cool to look around at where all my favorite treats are made. Thanks!"

"You're welcome," Mrs. Cake said, a hint of anxiety in her voice. "Just be sure to call for me if you run into any trouble."

"Trouble? Hah! I'll be fine. It's this crazy taffy sale you should be worried about."

Mrs. Cake sighed and looked at the chaos of her store room. Another set of pegasi had appeared and was currently trying to rescue the first. Rainbow Dash walked through the swinging doors that led to the kitchen.

Rainbow Dash stared in wonder at the kitchen around her. She had been in here before but this time something was different. It was clean; very clean. She wouldn't use the word 'immaculate', mostly because she never used words like 'immaculate', but this was definitely the cleanest she had ever seen Sugarcube Corner's kitchen. Everything was in its place and even labeled! Flour, sugar, salt, spoons, bowls. Anypony could become familiar with this kitchen and be ready to bake within a minute. The only thing that was out of place was a recipe book opened on the counter.

Rainbow Dash looked at the page the recipe book was opened to. There was a picture of a plate of cookies with the words 'Triple Fudge Pecan Crunch Cookies' written above it. Rainbow Dash instantly recognized the cookies. Those were the cookies that Pinkie had made for somepony or another's party last week. The sheer amount of chocolate in each bite. The pecans adding the perfect amount of crunch. Rainbow Dash's mouth began to water just thinking about them. She had to have some more! Maybe Pinkie could make her some when she got back. Where was Pinkie anyways? It didn't take this long to walk back from Daisy's house. Maybe Pinkie had returned already and was trying to get through the crowd? Rainbow Dash's stomach growled. It looked like waiting on Pinkie wasn't an option. If she wanted those cookies, she'd have to make them herself and that was a scary thought.

Rainbow Dash looked at the instructions for the recipe. Maybe it would be super easy like:

*Step 1.) Take premade cookies from cookie jar.*

*Step 2.) Eat cookies.*

However, it was a real recipe with an ingredient list, two pages of instructions and cooking times. Rainbow Dash sighed. Being one of the worst bakers in Equestria meant it was almost impossible to bake

something well. She had some weird bad luck aura that kicked in anytime she tried to bake.

Rainbow Dash remembered back to the WBE competition three years ago, her first competition; the competition she had lost. After it was over, the champion had congratulated her, told her that she had a natural talent and offered to give her some pointers for next time. Something about retiring and wanting the next generation to be just as good. Rainbow Dash had just wanted to go home and try to forget about the shame of losing but the champion had offered a free dinner.

The champion had talked; a lot. Rainbow Dash had tried to listen but it was just so boring. The bad luck had a name. Started with an 'I', or was it an 'E'? Some vowel. But the interesting thing about it was that it could be controlled with enough practice. It could be blocked off to a point where it was actually possible to bake something decent. Rainbow Dash hadn't listen to those instructions. She had only cared about the other part. The way to boost it.

Now would have been a good time to remember how to block it off. Rainbow Dash stared at the recipe. She could hear the cookies calling to her. Surely the awesomeness of these cookies could overpower any bad luck aura. If she was really careful and did everything exactly by the book, couldn't the cookies still turn out edible?

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Mrs. Cake was on the verge of tears. The taffy sale had sounded like such a good idea at the start. But now? The entire store room was a tangled mass of ponies piled half way up to the ceiling, unable to move. Perhaps the taffy was priced too low or tasted too good? She had heard that the Mayor had called in the fire department and that they were slowly untangling one pony at a time. It didn't help that some ponies had spilled their taffy, getting everyone around them stuck in tighter. It was only a matter of time before some official pony came in through the back door and began asking difficult questions like, 'How did this happen?' At least Rainbow Dash was being quiet in the kitchen. Mrs. Cake's eyes opened wide. Too quiet! She looked over her counter to a pony upside down on the floor with her face buried in a bag of taffy.



“Is there anything else I can help you with?” Mrs. Cake asked. The pony stopped her chewing, thought a bit, then shook head head ‘no’. “OK then. I’ll be back in just a minute. Ring the bell if you need anything.”

Mrs. Cake tried not to show her panic as she walked quickly towards the kitchen.

“Rainbow Dash?” Mrs. Cake said as she passed through the doors. “Is everything all- GOOD GRAVY!”

Her kitchen! Her nice clean kitchen! Her nice formally clean now covered in flour, eggs, chocolate and Celestia only knows what else kitchen! Mrs. Cake resisted the urge to faint right there. She pulled her eyes from the stains on her drapes and focused on the pegasus at the counter. Rainbow Dash was standing next to a mixing bowl whose contents were currently on fire. Mrs. Cake gasped, opened a cabinet, grabbed a baking sheet, rushed to the mixing bowl and set the sheet on top, snuffing out the fire. Mrs. Cake lifted the sheet and looked at the blackened remains of whatever was in the mixing bowl.

“What happened?” Mrs. Cake asked, feeling her panic level reaching new heights.

“You mean it wasn’t supposed to do that?” Rainbow Dash asked, a shocked look on her face.

“No! Why in the world would you set it on fire? What happened to my kitchen?”

“Its not like I was *trying* to set it on fire. I just followed the recipe. I combined everything in a big bowl and stirred it with a wooden spoon.”

“Just stirred it with a wooden spoon?”

“Yes.”

“How fast were you stirring it?”

Rainbow Dash opened her mouth to answer and then paused. “How fast was I supposed to stir it?”

“Slowly!”

“Oh! Then I was definitely stirring it faster than slowly.” Rainbow Dash looked around at the kitchen. “Wow, did I do all that? The bag of flour exploded earlier, happens to me all the time. I could probably use a splatter guard for the bowl too. But no problem! Now that I know what I did wrong, I can make the next batch perfectly.” Rainbow Dash grabbed the bowl and began to dump its contents into the trash.

“N-next batch?” Mrs. Cake felt her eye begin to twitch.

“Yep. I never give up! No way am I letting some dumb cookies get the better of me!”

The service bell in the store room rang. Mrs. Cake was unsure if that was a good or bad sign. “I need to go back up front,” she said. “Please... please! If you have any questions, ask me!”

“That won’t be necessary, Mrs. Cake. I know how busy you are. Trust me when I say I have this all under control.”

Mrs. Cake walked back to the kitchen door and took a deep breath to calm herself. “Please hurry back, Pinkie Pie,” she prayed quietly as she passed through the doors.

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Rainbow Dash went back to her baking with determination. She carefully measured, poured and stirred. Pinkie made this look so easy. She would bounce around the kitchen with her endless supply of energy, combining ingredients without even looking at the recipe. She also used made up measuring directions like ‘a pinch’ or ‘a smidgen’ and yet somehow that was the right amount. And she sang while doing it! Rainbow Dash took her mouth off the spoon and wondered if she should sing. The recipe said nothing about singing so that was probably improvising. Best to stick with what’s written.

The dough looked mixed enough so Rainbow Dash checked on the next step. *Using a clean flat surface and rolling pin, flatten dough until it is*

*no more than half an inch thick.* Now that sounded fun and easy. None of that lame slow mixing. She turned the dough out onto the counter, found the rolling pin and got to work. The chunks of chocolate and pecan pieces made the dough a bit more difficult to roll out than Rainbow Dash was expecting but a little more force fixed that. Not too much force though. She wasn't going to set the dough on fire again!

With the dough rolled as flat as it was going to get, Rainbow Dash looked at the next step. *Using a cookie cutter, cut dough into desired shapes then move cut out pieces to a baking sheet.* Rainbow Dash stared at the recipe, then said, "Cookie cutter? Don't I just put lumps of dough on the baking sheet? What the hay is a cookie cutter?" Mrs. Cake would know, but she was so busy with her taffy sale. A cookie cutter was probably something really obvious and then she would feel dumb having had to ask. Rainbow Dash scanned the room for something she could use. A smile came to her lips. There. In the corner. That would work perfectly. These cookies were going to be so awesome.

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Mrs. Cake was feeling better. The fireponies had succeeded in getting everypony unstuck and were able to hose off all the taffy. The Mayor had seemed a tad upset that she now had to write out a town ordinance on the conduction of taffy sales but there was no hard feelings, even among those that had been stuck. There was now a lone police officer outside Sugarcube Corner, only admitting five ponies at a time. It worked out well and sales were briskly made.

"That will be five bits," Mrs. Cake said, tallying up her latest sale.

The pony turned to get money from his bag when something caught his eye. "Oh! Are those jawbreakers up there?"

Mrs. Cake looked to the shelf above her. "Why yes. Would you like some?"

"Oh yeah! I love jawbreakers!"

Mrs. Cake moved the rolling ladder, climbed up it and picked up some tongs in her mouth. "How many did you want?" She asked.

“One please. Wait! Better make it two.”

“Of course!” Mrs. Cake lowered the tongs and grabbed two jawbreakers. As she lifted them from the jar she heard a sound from the kitchen.

**Thunk.**

Mrs. Cake’s jaw clenched, sending the two jawbreakers to the floor below.

**Thunk. Thunk.**

“Is... ah... Is everything all right up there?” the pony below asked.

**Thunk. Thunk. THUNK.**

Mrs. Cake grabbed the jar, scurried down the ladder and shoved the jar at the pony. “Here! Free of charge!” she said, smiling extra big and feeling her twitch coming back.

“Are you sure? I couldn’t ju-”

“Take them!”

“Well... OK...” The pony put the bag of taffy and jar of jawbreakers into his bag while Mrs. Cake went under the counter and pulled out a ‘Be back in 5 minutes’ sign.

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Rainbow Dash was getting upset. The cookie cutting had started so easily but then, as usual, she got carried away. Now she had a cleaver handle in her mouth and no matter how hard she pulled, the cleaver would not come out of the counter top. “Stupid... urgh... cleaver! Come... urgh... out!”

“Rainbow Dash!” Mrs. Cake yelled. “What are you doing?”

Rainbow dash let go of the cleaver. "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm cutting cookies."

"Why aren't you using a cookie cutter?"

"Uh, this *is* a cookie cutter."

"Nooooo..." Mrs. Cake opened a drawer. "*THESE* are cookie cutters."

Rainbow Dash looked at the assorted metal cutters in all shapes and sizes then back at the cleaver. "Oh..."

"Really, Rainbow Dash. I said if you had any questions to ask me."

"I know! But... you were so busy I didn't want to interrupt and... well... I would have felt stupid having to ask. But... now I feel stupid that I didn't ask."

Seeing the dejected Rainbow Dash, Mrs. Cake couldn't stay mad anymore. "Oh... there, there, dearie. It's alright. I can't expect you to know these things. You are a self-admitted bad baker after all."

"The Worst Baker in Equestria," Rainbow Dash said, brightening up.

"The Worst Baker in Equestria," Mrs. Cake agreed. "Do you need any help with the rest of the recipe?"

"No, I think I got it. I use these cookie cutters to cut out circles, move the cut outs to that baking sheet, put the baking sheet in the oven at the correct temperature for the correct amount of time, take the sheet out, let the cookies cool, then eat them!"

"That's it! Just be sure to preheat the oven first."

"Got it! Thanks, Mrs. Cake."

"You're welcome. Now I better get back up front and make sure the taffy sale is still under control," Mrs. Cake said then left the kitchen.

Rainbow Dash walked to the oven and turned the knob to the correct temperature. She then went back to her dough and began cutting it with the circular cookie cutter. She left the cleaver where it was. Somethings were worth dealing with later. After cutting out as many cookies as she could, Rainbow Dash gathered up the remaining dough, rolled it out once more and cut out a few more cookies to get the maximum amount. A proper baker didn't waste food, especially cookies. The baking sheet was completely loaded with cookies but the recipe did say to leave very little space between them. Rainbow Dash opened the oven and slid the tray in. She shut the oven's door and smiled at her work. A couple missteps here and there, but it could have been much worse. Rainbow Dash shivered at thinking of some of the things she baked in the past.

Rainbow Dash set the oven timer to ten minutes. She hated having to wait for so long. She supposed she could double the temperature and get the cookies done in five minutes but that sounded like trouble waiting to happen. Besides, the oven didn't go up to nine hundred degrees.

For the first seven minutes of baking, Rainbow Dash was feeling proud of herself; then the smoke began to come out of the oven. She quickly bit into a mouth mitt and opened the oven's door. Smoke poured out but Rainbow Dash was able to grab onto the baking sheet and move it on top of the oven before she started coughing. Standing on her hind legs, Rainbow Dash flapped her wings to blow away the smoke. Once out of the heat, the cookies finally stopped burning. At least they weren't on fire anymore but they had been reduced to blackened bricks.

Rainbow Dash was furious. What. The. Hay. This wasn't her fault! She followed the recipe exactly! This stupid bad luck aura was getting in the way of the best cookies ever! She went back to the recipe book and tried to find what went wrong. Ingredients? No. Mixing? Not this time. Baking? She had set the oven for four hundred and fifty degrees and baked for ten minutes just like- wait a second. Rainbow Dash scrapped her hoof on the baking temperature. It looked like some flour had gotten stuck to the page. Looking at the now clean page, Rainbow Dash fell back on her haunches. Three hundred and fifty degrees. Not four hundred and fifty. She sighed. Maybe it was time to give up?

No.

Rainbow Dash never gave up. These stupid cookies were taunting her. She turned the oven down to the correct temperature, grabbed the baking sheet and dumped the burnt cookies into the trash. No screw ups this time! Everything by the book, checked and double checked before and after each step. The next batch of cookies would be perfect.

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Mrs. Cake was happy. The sale had gotten a bit out of control for a while but it turned out all right in the end. The state of her kitchen wasn't even bothering her anymore with all the money the sale had brought in. The amount of customers was steadily declining as most everypony in town that wanted some taffy had gotten some. Pinkie still hadn't returned and that was a little worrisome but that mare knew how to take care of herself. Hopefully she hadn't forgotten about meeting up with her friend. Mrs. Cake had checked in on Rainbow Dash a little while ago. The pegasus seemed hard at work on another batch of cookies so Mrs. Cake didn't bother her. Something must have gone wrong with the last batch. That poor pony just couldn't catch a break today.

When the last customer in the store left, Mrs. Cake decided to see how Rainbow Dash was doing. She entered the kitchen to find Rainbow Dash staring at a sheet of cookies with a spatula in her mouth. Mrs. Cake's eyes were briefly drawn to the floury hoof prints on the ceiling before she decided she didn't want to know.

"Mrs. Cake!" Rainbow Dash said before lifting a cookie and moving it to a plate. She set the spatula down. "How would you like to be the first to try one of Rainbow Dash's Super Awesome Triple Fudge Pecan Crunch Cookies!"

"I'd love to! I'm so glad everything worked out in the end. I guess it just goes to show you that hard work and persistence pays off."

"Does it ever! Now try it and tell me how awesome it is!"

Mrs. Cake took a bite from the cookie. "Oh, Rainbow Dash! This is..." Mrs. Cake started to say but then she began to taste the cookie. She wanted to swallow the bite to be polite. Rainbow Dash had worked so hard

on these cookies. Probably much harder than anypony ever had or should have worked on cookies, but still; she had to swallow. For Rainbow Dash.

In the end, Mrs. Cake's will to survive was too strong and she spat the cookie out on the plate. Rainbow Dash was stunned and quiet for a long time. Finally she spoke, "Y-you're kidding. Please tell me this is a joke."

"I'm sorry, dearie, but..." Mrs. Cake hated to say this after Rainbow Dash had worked so hard. "I think you mistook the salt for sugar... and maybe added a few things you shouldn't have."

"Oh no I didn't! No, no, no! You see this jar?" Rainbow Dash pointed at a jar that was labeled 'sugar'. "This is sugar. I used a lot of this. And that jar?" Rainbow Dash pointed at a jar labeled 'salt'. "That's salt. I only used a little of it. Everything was by the book. The cookies are perfect. I'll prove it!"

Rainbow Dash stuck the spatula under a cookie and hit it with her hoof; launching the cookie into the air.

"Wait, Rainbow Dash! Don't-" Mrs. Cake reached out but it was too late.

Rainbow Dash snapped the cookie out of the air and swallowed it in a gulp. "You see?" she said. "Delicious."

Mrs. Cake was shocked at what just happened and stared at Rainbow Dash. After a minute Rainbow Dash said quietly, "Mrs. Cake? May I use your bathroom? I'm about to throw up."

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Rainbow Dash still felt miserable as she sipped the tea Mrs. Cake had made for her. It was dark out now. Still no sign of Pinkie. Mr. Cake had woken up and listened to both of their stories from the day. He laughed at the trouble they both had and then laughed harder when he saw the state of the kitchen. Rainbow Dash and Mrs. Cake tried to get mad at him but ended up laughing too.

"Feeling better?" Mrs. Cake asked Rainbow Dash.



“Somewhat,” Rainbow Dash said. The tea was doing wonders to calm her stomach.

“I checked the sugar and salt jars. It seems that somepony pulled a prank and switched their labels.”

Rainbow Dash chuckled, “Oh, Pinkie Pie. You got me good.”

“Speaking of Pinkie Pie,” Mr. Cake said, “I hope she’s alright. She isn’t one to miss dinner.”

“You’re right,” Mrs. Cake said. “I better go start dinner. If she isn’t back by when I’m done, we’ll have to start looking for her.”

“Mrs. Cake? Before you start cooking, can I try making those cookies one more time?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“Oh... um. Rainbow Dash... Do you really think that’s a good idea?”

“No, Mrs. Cake. I don’t think it’s a good idea. But I do think it’s something I have to do.”

Mrs. Cake sighed. “OK. I’ve already checked the ingredients and everything is in its correct container. You show those cookies who’s the boss, you hear?”

“Oh, I will. You can count on that.”

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Rainbow Dash baked like she never baked before and certainly not like the past three times she baked today. She followed the book exactly. Checked, double checked and triple checked each step. At random times she tasted the salt and sugar to make sure they hadn’t switched. Nothing was going to go wrong this time. She mixed. She rolled. She cut. She baked. Finally done, Rainbow Dash surrendered the kitchen to Mrs. Cake and waited for the cookies to be ready to come out of the oven.

“Rainbow Dash!” Pinkie yelled as she bounded into the kitchen. “Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry I’m late. I was hosting Daisy’s birthday party and it was super duper mega fun with the dancing and the cake and the pin the tail on the pony. We had so much fun but we made a big mess! Like, way bigger than any mess ever has or ever will be. It was so big! And I couldn’t just leave Daisy to clean it because I helped make it, well, so did other ponies, but I made most of it! So I got everypony at the party to help clean up and even some ponies that weren’t at the party and before you know it our party mess cleanup became a mess-cleanup party! It was an even bigger party than the last with an even bigger mess which I didn’t think was possible but apparently it was! And some ponies brought taffy! The party got so big that even ponies that didn’t want to be at the party became part of the party as the party grew around them and then somepony called the cops! It was really super embarrassing and Daisy was upset but I told her I’d throw her a I’m-glad-you-didn’t-get-taken-to-jail party just as soon as I helped clean up this party’s mess. But everypony was all, ‘No! We’ll clean the mess up. You can just go home now.’ And I felt bad because it was such a really really big mess and- are you baking?”

Rainbow Dash blinked then said, “Uh... yeah, I had to get *some* training in today after all.”

“This was training?” Mrs. Cake asked.

“This last batch was. If I can’t even get these dumb cookies to turn out right after trying this hard, then this year’s trophy is in the bag.”

“I admit your previous attempts were less than desired, but I watched you this time and you did everything right. There’s no way those cookies won’t be perfect this time.”

“I wish that were true, but you are severely underestimating just how bad of a baker I am.”

The oven timer dinged, letting everypony know that ten minutes were up. Rainbow Dash bit into the mouth mitt, took the baking sheet out of the oven and placed it on the counter. She looked apologetically at Mrs. Cake.

Mrs. Cake was in shock. Her mouth hung open as she tried to find the words. "I... I don't understand! I watched you! Start to finish! There's no way that... This is impossible!"

On the baking sheet was row after row of blueberry muffins.

"I wouldn't eat them if I were you," Rainbow Dash said as she sniffed the muffins. "They smell a little rancid."

"But... there was no blueberries! I watched! Chocolate and pecans! I... I..." Mrs. Cake's mind had decided that this was enough stress for one day and had Mrs. Cake finally pass out.

Pinkie looked at Mrs. Cake who was snoring softly. "I think you broke her," she said. "Chocolate and pecans? Oh! Were you trying to make Triple Fudge Pecan Crunch Cookies?"

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash said. "I knew I could never pull it off but I just wanted some so bad."

"Well why didn't you say so? I made a ton of those last night for Daisy's party! There's plenty left in the cookie jar!"

"Really? Awesome! Looks like I'll get my cookies after all."

"Uh-huh. Did you know that those are Gummy's favorite cookies too?"

Upon hearing his name, Gummy popped his head out of Pinkie's mane, looked at Rainbow Dash, squeaked happily, and leapt.

# Chapter 4

## The G&PT's Terrible Day

"Thank you! Thank you, Fillydelphia! You've been a wonderful audience!"

Trixie let her magic loose as she took a bow. Colorful lights and explosions surrounded her as her fireworks spun and flew about the stage. All illusions, of course. She wasn't crazy enough to set off real fireworks indoors. But deception was the tool of the magician. The fireworks zipped around the auditorium, coming close but never quite touching the ponies in their seats. A little fear and excitement was a great way to leave the audience wanting more. Trixie rose from her bow as the last of the magical fireworks fizzled out. Her cape with its field of stars flapped in an imaginary breeze. She smiled at the audience and listened to the applause, letting her eyes scan the crowd.

There, in the front like always, was Mrs. Dimmer, the aging wife of this theatre's owner. She stamped her hooves loudly, her eyes shining with delight. Trixie owed that earth pony so much. She was the one that had helped Trixie get off the streets and back on her hooves after that disastrous performance in Ponyville had almost ruined her career. It was thanks to this job at the Dimmer Theatre that Trixie had already saved up enough to get her starry hat and cape replaced.

Along the far side of the auditorium was Stubs, the unicorn of many jobs. Ticket seller, usher, handyman. If there was a odd job that needed doing, Stubs was the pony doing it. He was currently standing next to a broom, his magic twirling it as he waited for the audience to leave. Trixie had always wondered what the cutie mark of the pony with so many talents

was. However, Stubs always wore a long coat that covered his flank and only served to deepen the mystery.

The other members of the audience were unfamiliar to Trixie. Either out-of-towners or first-timers most likely. At least they were applauding respectfully. All except for the last row. In the last row were two unicorn colts that seemed more interested in noisily telling each other jokes than watching Trixie's performance. They got up and left the auditorium. Trixie fought against an eye twitch. Seeing those two reminded her of the last pair of unicorn colts she had met. The ones that had destroyed her trailer and all her things after thinking it was a good idea to bring an urso into a populated area. Trixie calmed herself by taking deep breaths. Those two in the back had been rude but they didn't seem the type to endanger other ponies just to see more of her 'awesome' magic.

Though she was smiling, Trixie was not happy. She had to get off the stage. This was becoming too much for her to bear. She went into the standard end to all of her performances. Trixie reared up on her hind legs and brought her front legs down hard. When her hooves hit the stage, there was a great burst of smoke that swirled out to obscure her. The smoke quickly vanished, leaving no trace of Trixie behind.

Trixie breathed hard from behind the curtains. She had made it this time. There was no laughing from ponies catching a glimpse of her tail vanishing off stage. A scowl formed on Trixie's face, replacing the fake smile that had been there a moment before. She fought hard to control her breathing. Eight. There had been eight ponies in the audience. That was two less than last time. Eight ponies in a theatre that sat over a hundred. Tears burned in Trixie's eye but she refused to let them fall.

How? It was the only question on Trixie's mind. How had it come to this? How had she fallen so far as to become a lowly stage magician? True, she had always been a stage magician but at least she had used to own her own stage. It wasn't fair. She used to bring whole towns out to her performance. They adored her. Waited on her hoof and leg. Yes, her ego had grown large and she would sometimes pick on the hecklers, but it was all harmless fun. The rest of the crowd loved it. Everything had been great until Ponyville.

Ponyville. If, no, when Trixie got a new trailer, she would never go back to that podunk town. Her performance there had been going great, spectacular even. Then that rainbow colored pegasus had booed her. Actually booed her! For doing magic at a magic show! The worst part was the crowd had started to take the pegasus' side. Of course Trixie had to show that little neigsayer and her friends a thing or two. She even made up that ridiculous story about defeating an ursa major.

Everything had spiraled down from there. But it all started with that pegasus. What was her name, even? Rainbow... something. Probably something stupid like Rainbow Dork. If Rainbow Dork hadn't started booing, then Trixie wouldn't have had to make up that story and then those colts... those colts! And her trailer and all her stuff and-

Trixie closed her eyes and held her breath. She counted to ten and then kept going until she reached twenty. She started breathing again, in and out, slowly. When she had calmed herself, she opened her eyes. Mr. Dimmer's incredibly hairy face was the only thing she could see. Trixie gave a startled yell and took a step away from the earth pony.

"Another splendid performance, Miss Trixie," Mr. Dimmer said.

"Wha- I- Yes... yes it was a magnificent performance, was it not? I even developed several new tricks just for tonight."

"Quite an amazing display. I know my wife loved every minute of it."

Trixie smiled and nodded. Mr. Dimmer nodded back and continued looking at Trixie. At least Trixie thought he was looking at her. Between his mane and mustache, there was so much hair covering Mr. Dimmer's face it was nearly impossible to tell what he was looking at. Or if he was even still awake. Trixie cleared her throat. "I'm... I'm sorry I'm not drawing the crowds I used to, Mr. Dimmer."

"Oh, that's quite alright. I suspect most ponies in town have already seen your show. I know you try to keep it fresh but there's only so many magic tricks you can see before even the new seems old. Seems to mostly be tourists coming to see you now and Fillydelphia isn't exactly the tourist capital of Equestria."

“Yes, it’s just... I know the theatre has already lost some acts and-”

“Not to worry! This theatre has been in my family for generations and always will be. It goes all the way back to my great-great-great-great-grandfather. It’ll eventually be passed on to my son and then grandson and so on and so forth. I know I’m getting old, but one day my son will get his head out of the clouds and take over so I can retire.”

“Isn’t your son a blacksmith? And doesn’t he have an anvil for a cutie mark?”

“Just a phase he’s going through. Anyway, my point is this theatre has seen its fair share of hard times and if there’s one thing it knows how to do, it’s adapt. Never fear, I’ve got a plan! I have a big meeting tomorrow morning and if things go well, why, we’ll be so jam packed with ponies we could fill every seat in the house; twice over!”

“Really?” Trixie said, growing excited. She hadn’t performed for a full house since she had first come to the Dimmer Theatre so many months ago.

“Yes! So stop your fretting and enjoy your evening. I’ll be sure to tell you the good news tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Mr. Dimmer! I will!”

Trixie began walking towards her dressing room that she unfortunately also called her bedroom. Rent was expensive in Fillydelphia and she was lucky Mrs. Dimmer had arranged for her to be able to live in the theatre. Things were looking up though. She had been growing increasingly worried. Her pay was directly proportional to the crowd she brought in and at the rate she was going it would have been years before she could afford a new trailer. Assuming she wasn’t fired before then. However, if there was one thing Trixie had learned during her stay with the Dimmers, it was to trust in Mr. Dimmer’s plans. His ideas often seemed hair-brained, ill-planned or questionably-sane but they never failed to work. If he said things were looking up, then Trixie had no reason to doubt him.

Trixie reached her door and was greeted by an odd sight: a bouquet of flowers. A bouquet of flowers by itself isn’t normally an odd thing. Trixie

was a truly magnificent magician, after all. If anything, the odd thing should have been that she didn't get a bouquet of flowers more often. But what was odd was what the type of flowers. Trixie had never seen flowers like these before.

The flowers were multiple shades of blue. They had two rows of petals; a small inner row closed into a bulb and a large outer row that hung down. Four stamens poked out of the bulb, each tipped in a small circle.

Trixie used her telekinesis to float the bouquet to her face and sniffed the flowers. They were incredibly fragrant and smelled amazing. Trixie buried her face in the bouquet and breathed deeply. She let her breath out in a happy sigh and entered her room. Things certainly were looking up. Today had been a good day in the end and tomorrow would be even better.

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"I'm afraid it's poison joke," the doctor said as he flipped through his charts.

"Poison what?" Trixie said.

Trixie had woken up that morning and known something was wrong. Getting tangled in her sheets, falling from bed, noticing the spots on her forehead, breaking her mirror, tripping over her trashcan, burning her toast, burning her orange, burning her glass of milk, stumbling down the theatre steps, being chased by a dog, being chased by a cat, being cornered by a dog and cat working as a team, falling in the mud, becoming lost in the back allies, finding her way back to a street she knew only to have a passing carriage splash her with mud, having a flower pot fall on her, having a paint bucket fall on her, having a painting of a flower pot fall on her, finding the dog and cat waiting for her around a corner, having the doctor's door opened in her face, and being told she has an ailment she had never heard of before had just reaffirmed this.

"Poison joke. It's a poisonous plant most commonly found within the Everfree Forest. Unlike most other poisonous plants, it doesn't cause itchiness or swelling. Instead, it plays a magical joke on whatever touches it. Those blue spots on your forehead are the rash caused by it."



“This is a joke? I nearly killed myself just getting here!”

“Yes, well... usually the joke is something harmless but annoying. Such as a pegasus’ wings being turned backwards or a pony getting giant hooves so they walk weird.” The doctor chuckled. “I once saw a pony under the effects of poison joke that looked just fine until you turned off the lights. She actually glowed in the dark!” The doctor started laughing but stopped and cleared his throat when Trixie hadn’t joined in. “In ah... in your case the poison joke seems to be manifesting itself as bad luck.”

The stool Trixie was sitting on collapsed. Trixie stared at the doctor.

“Extreme bad luck. I’ve never actually heard of such a severe reaction to poison joke before.”

The top two tacks of an eye chart fell out causing the chart to fall forward and land on Trixie. Trixie continued to stare at the doctor.

“Which is why we ran blood work. The bad news is that it seems that you are allergic to poison joke. The effects of the plant usually fades after a couple of days on its own. However, due to your allergy, it could take a while longer.”

“How much longer?”

“We really have no way of telling but I would guess a week at least.”

“A week! How am supposed to live like this for a week? I haven’t even been able to eat anything today. I’ve been assaulted by animals, I have to constantly look up to make sure nothing falls on me and I have to constantly look down to make sure I don’t fall into something! This has been the second worst day in my life, quickly approaching first, and you’re telling me this could go on for a week!” Trixie was seething. She gritted her teeth and tried to keep from yelling further.

“Calm down. Take nice relaxing breaths. There is a cure.”

Trixie gave a sigh of relief and let the building stress fade. “Please mention that quicker next time. So, what? I just buy some ointment, take some medicine?”

“A bath with an herbal remedy added to it.”

“Well that sounds nice. Just write me a prescription and I’ll be on my way.”

“I’m afraid there’s more bad news.”

Trixie stared at the doctor, her stress quickly returning. “Really? Why ever was I thinking there would be good news. Of course there is bad news seeing as I’m CURSED WITH BAD LUCK! Now, what is this bad news?”

The doctor gulped. “The herbal remedy has recently become quite popular at spas all over Equestria due to its exfoliating and skin rejuvenating properties. As a result, the herbs are in high demand and in short supply seeing as how many of them come from the Everfree Forest itself. This means that the price of the bath has been rising steadily. It was seventy-five bits the last time I checked but it could be higher now.”

The doctor cringed away and raised his clipboard between him and Trixie. When nothing was thrown or shouted, he slowly lowered it. Trixie was sitting calmly on the broken stool and staring at the doctor. This scared the doctor more than her yelling.

“I’m sorry,” Trixie said, her voice dripping with venom. “I must have misheard you. It sounded like you said the cure would cost me almost all the money I’ve been saving for the past few months and that can’t possibly be right. I’m sure there must be an emergency supply of herbs on hoof for those that need it. After all, the health care in Equestria is quite good and the doctors wouldn’t allow such powerful healing medicine to be controlled by a couple of day spas. That would be silly. Now, why don’t you tell me again what I obviously misheard the first time?”

“Y-you might be able to get a reduced price if you shared a community bath and split the cost with some ponies?”

Trixie got up and let the eye chart clatter to the floor. The doctor backed into the corner and kept trying to back up further. Trixie breathed deeply in a vain attempt to calm herself.

“Do you have any idea who I am? I am the Great and Powerful Trixie! I preform the greatest feats of magic known to pony kind!” Trixie’s horn began to glow and the doctor was dragged next to her face. “Fix this!” she hissed.

A ceiling tile came loose and broke in two on Trixie’s head. Trixie released the doctor and fell woosily onto her haunches.

“One more thing,” the doctor said as he tried to keep his distance.

“More bad news?”

“Well... you see. It’s... Whether news is good or bad is so subjective...” The doctor closed his eyes, breathed deeply then quickly said, “The bad luck also seems to respond to your magic so you should probably refrain from using it until you’re better. Please don’t hurt me!”

Trixie got up and walked towards the door. “I think we’re done here,” she said. Trixie began to grab the door handle with her mouth only to have the door swing open into her face.

“Doctor?” the nurse asked. “I just wanted to- oh my! I’m so sorry!”

Trixie dislodged her horn from the door. “Quite all right,” she said groggily. “The Powerful and Great audience thanks you for being such a wonderful Trixie and reminds you to try the fried celery.”

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Trixie slammed shut the front door of the Dimmer Theatre as she dashed inside. She sat down as she tried to catch her breath. She was thankful that most cats and dogs had yet to figure out how to open doors.

Trixie didn’t know what to do. Her choices were to either spend nearly all of her money on a bath or live with bad luck until the poison joke wore off. If she was lucky, it would be gone in a couple of days. If she was unlucky- Trixie’s breath caught in her throat. She was unlucky. The poison joke would last as long as possible. Maybe even forever. Could this day get any worse? Trixie froze. Why had she thought that? Of course the day

could get worse and probably will now that she had taunted fate by thinking that question.

Trixie nervously looked around the theatre's entrance. No objects hanging above her. No obvious holes in the floor. She would have to keep her eyes open for unobvious ones. No doors ready to swing open into her. Except the one behind her! Trixie took a few steps forward. Disaster averted. No angry animals... Wait! There was one over- no, that's just Stubs, standing at the ticket booth and looking at her like she was crazy.

Trixie took a step forward and waited. When nothing happened, she repeated the process. It was about an hour later that Trixie had made her way backstage and was approaching her dressing room. She was five feet away. So far, no bad luck. Four feet. It would be happening soon. Three feet. Keep focused, Trixie. Two feet. You can do it, Trixie. One foot. Trixie nervously reached out with a shaking hoof and touched her dressing room door. Nothing happened.

Trixie gave a sigh of relief. She was being silly, letting paranoia rule her life. Poison joke was only bad if you let it be. She just had to get her money, go to the spa and take a bath. Maybe she could even get a discount with her being such a famous magician. This would only be a small setback. Mr. Dimmer had a plan and soon Trixie would be swimming in bits. She would buy a new trailer. A bigger, better trailer with more hidden compartments and folding stages than you could count. She would tour all of Equestria, letting everpony know she was back. Ponyville would be forgotten, of course. The town would become a laughing stock, known only as the one place the Great and Powerful Trixie didn't perform. Eventually she would be looking for a more permanent stage. Maybe if Mr. Dimmer's son kept refusing, Trixie could buy this theatre. The Trixie Theatre. She liked the sound of that. Her name in lights. Everypony calling-

"Miss Trixie! There you are!"

Trixie yelped in surprise, spun around and backed into her door. The screws that were holding the door hinges in place fell out and the door began to tilt forward. She was slowly lowered to her belly as the door's weight pushed down on her. Trixie gave Mr. Dimmer a miserable look.

“Oh my,” Mr. Dimmer said. “Terribly sorry. I was certain we had your door fixed last week.” He moved his head under the door and lifted it off of Trixie, allowing her to crawl out.

“Not your fault,” Trixie said as she got back on her hooves.

“Miss Trixie, are you alright? You’re covered in dried mud and... is that paint?”

“It’s a long story. I need to take a bath.”

Mr. Dimmer nodded. “Anyway, I’ve been hoping you would return soon. My meeting this morning went better than I had hoped and I have the most wonderful news!”

The most wonderful news. Those were the best words Trixie had ever heard. They were like a parent’s loving embrace. Suddenly, all the worries of the day melted away and left behind a warm glow. It was proof that no matter how bad things got, there was always a silver lining.

“I’ve been looking for some time to get a well know name into this theatre,” Mr. Dimmer was saying. “I spoke with just such a famous duo this morning. They got their start working in little Mom and Pop theatres and felt it was right to make one their permanent venue. I must say that I had underestimated their popularity. There were ponies everywhere, begging for their autographs.”

Trixie was hanging on every word. A famous duo of traveling performers? Which ones? There were so many. Many of them were magicians too!

“The negotiations were going well until I happened to mention you.”

A feeling of dread came across Trixie. Had she messed things up? No, Mr. Dimmer had said he had wonderful news. Unless the wonderful news involved her being fired! Trixie felt herself beginning to hyperventilate.

“When they found out we had a resident magician, they were ecstatic. Especially once I told them how talented you were. They insisted they had to meet you when they got everything moved in next week. I do believe

they want to extend an offer for you to join their act. That is if you think you're up to it?"

"Yes! Of course!" Trixie's heart was pounding. Her, joining a famous performing duo. True, she enjoyed working alone but, how often does a chance like this come around?

"Wonderful! Now, I do have some bad news..."

Trixie stopped breathing. She didn't know if she could handle anymore bad news today.

"The theatre will be closed for the next week as we make the needed changes to the stage. There needs to be a few more trap doors added and it needs to be extended ever so slightly. I know how much you love performing, but you won't be able to while the construction is going on. Not to worry though. I'll still pay you next week as if the construction wasn't happening."

"Thank you, Mr. Dimmer. That wasn't bad news at all."

Mr. Dimmer laughed. "I guess not. Especially with all the good news mixed in. I just know you're going to love working on this puppet show."

Trixie froze. "P-puppet show?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes! Sorry. I was so excited I forgot to mention their names. Surely you've heard of the Magnificent Grape Brothers? They've been looking for a unicorn with a talent for illusions for some time. They felt magic would make great special effects to go along with their puppeteering."

"Puppet... show?" Trixie repeated weakly.

"Yes. With school starting up soon, I knew all the fillies and colts in town would be looking for something to do after class and a puppet show was the answer! Let's be honest, Trixie. Magic shows are last year. Once you get up and running with the Grape Brothers, we can cancel your act. You'll be having such a great time working with puppets that you'll forget all about your magic tricks. Are you feeling alright, Miss Trixie?"

“J-just fine... I think the weight of this... wonderful news is just finally catching up to me is all. I think I need to lie down.”

“I felt the same way once the meeting was over. Good afternoon, Miss Trixie.”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Dimmer.”

Trixie stumbled over her fallen door and into her dressing room. She carefully stepped around the broken glass and got on to her bed. Once there, she laid on her back and stared at the ceiling. Puppet show. Trixie, the Great and Powerful Puppeteer. The bed frame collapsed from under her. She got up.

Trixie felt like her room was spinning. She couldn't take much more of this. She had to get her money and get cured. Maybe it wouldn't reverse Mr. Dimmer's puppet show decision but at least she would be able to go through a day without everything collapsing out from under her. She could spend her week off doing productive things. Like finding out who gave her the poison joke in the first place. She would have a nice chat with them and explain to them calmly while dangling them over the edge of a cliff why it wasn't a good idea to mess with the Great and Powerful Trixie!

Trixie opened her drawers. “I bet it was those rude colts from earlier,” she said to herself. “They were jealous of Trixie. Everypony is jealous of Trixie. That's why they want me to work on a puppet show. Everyone laugh at Trixie! Laugh at the Unimportant and Inept Trixie. No pony likes her magic anymore so they keep her offstage as a living stage light and smoke machine. I'll show them. Where's my money? Where's my- wait... wrong drawer. That's right. Here it is.”

Trixie lifted out her bag of bits and was unsurprised when the seam opened up and spilled her money around her room.

“Oh no you don't,” she yelled at the ceiling. “I know what's going on. I'll try to go to the spa but I'll lose all my money along the way. Ha ha, that's such a funny joke. Well, you can't have it. You hear me? You can't have it!”

Trixie grabbed at a bit only to have it slip out from under her hoof and disappear down a crack in the floorboards. "It's starting," she squeaked. Trixie moved as fast as she dared, which wasn't very fast at all. She carefully lifted each bit one at a time and placed it inside of her hat. It was slow going, having to use her hooves and mouth for such menial tasks but she didn't dare risk using her magic and the increased bad luck it brought.

"Ninety-five... ninety-six... ninety-seven. That makes ninety-eight if I count the one that was stolen away from me. It's all here. Ha ha, won't it be funny when it turns out the bath costs ninety-eight bits and you're one short? Hilarious. What do I do now? The money will spill if I wear my hat. I could carry it in my mouth. But then a bird could snatch it away! See! I'm on to you! Wouldn't that be funny? Having a bird steal my hat and all my money? I'll put it in a metal box. With a lock! Yes! But then I might forget the combination. Or I might drop it in a lake and it'll sink! I'm a danger to myself. I need to get the money away from me. I need to... I need to stop talking to myself."

Trixie sat down on the floor, clutched her hat to her chest and whimpered. Everything was going wrong. Not just her money. Not just her bad luck. Mr. Dimmer's decision. Could she really give up performing and just do special effects? Could she just give up on who she was? What choices did she even have anymore?

"Hello? Trixie? Are you in there?" A mare stepped up to Trixie's broken door.

"Mrs. Dimmer?"

Mrs. Dimmer looked at both the disheveled room and distressed mare. "What happened?"

"I've... been having a really bad day. Sorry about the mirror... and the bed. It was an accident."

"It's not a problem, we all have our bad days. I heard about my husband's decision to stop your magic show and include you in a puppet show. Are you OK with that?"



“Well... I... No, Mrs. Dimmer. I’m not. I-it’s a job and I’ll still get to... to use magic but...”

“But it’s not *your* magic.”

Trixie shook her head sadly. Mrs. Dimmer sat down next to Trixie and let the unicorn lean on her. Mrs. Dimmer said nothing and just acted as a pillar of support that Trixie so desperately needed at the moment.

“It’ll be alright,” Mrs. Dimmer said once Trixie had quieted down. “My husband can be a bit of an oaf sometimes. He seems to have a hard time realizing that not everyone thinks the same way as he does. Don’t worry. I’ll speak with him. I’m sure I can get your magic show going again at least a couple nights a week.”

“You’ll do that for me?”

“Of course. I do so love watching your magic. It reminds me of my performing days. I was a lot alike you then.”

“You were a magician?”

Mrs. Dimmer laughed. “Surprised to hear an earth pony did magic? I admit, I could never do all the flashy stuff you unicorns can do but I was still able to pull a rabbit out from under my hat. Just so long as it hadn’t chewed its way out.” Trixie tried to laugh but her heart wasn’t in it.

“Feeling better?” Mrs. Dimmer asked. Trixie nodded and wiped her eyes with a hoof.

“Mrs. Dimmer? I have a favor to ask.”

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Trixie explained her situation and her idea. Mrs. Dimmer would hold onto the money and go to the spa an hour after Trixie had left. That way, the money would be well outside of the bad luck aura that was surrounding Trixie.

With the plan set, Trixie thanked Mrs. Dimmer for everything and made her way back to the front door. She had been granted a brief respite from the bad luck but she knew that would change once she exited the theatre. Trixie took a deep breath and opened the door.

Trixie stepped out of the Dimmer Theatre and looked up and down the street. No animals in sight. She would still have to be careful. They could be hiding. She had taken a few steps before it started to rain. There had been a rain scheduled for last night so there was no way Fillydelphia's weather team would have another so soon. Trixie looked up. "Figures," she said.

Floating above Trixie was a rain cloud no bigger than her head. Trixie walked a few steps only to have the rain cloud follow her. She sighed and continued walking down the street. After a few blocks, she finally spotted a pegasus.

"Excuse me, sir?" Trixie said, trying as hard as she could to sound pleasant.

The pegasus turned towards Trixie, looked up at the cloud then back at Trixie. "Yes?" he asked.

"I seem to be having a bit of a weather problem. Could you be so kind as to remedy it?"

"Oh, um, I dunno... I'm not on the weather team. I might get in trouble if I mess with the clouds."

Trixie breathed deep, held her breath for a few seconds and let it out. "I'm not asking you to mess with the clouds. I'm asking you to remove this obviously forgotten raincloud from above my head so that I won't be getting rained on. Do you enjoy seeing me get rained on? Is it a funny joke for you?"

"N-no. I'll move it."

"Thank you," Trixie said as the pegasus hovered above her and moved the cloud. Once the pegasus let go of the cloud though, it floated back to above Trixie's head.

"It ah... It really seems to like you?"

"How cute. Buck it."

"What?"

"Buck. The. Cloud."

The pegasus gulped and turned around. He lined himself up with the cloud and slowly worked his legs back and forth to make sure he was on target. Once he was ready, he pulled his legs up so he could buck the cloud as hard as possible. Trixie suddenly realized what was about to happen. "Wait!" she yelled.

The pegasus stopped and turned his head to look at Trixie. Trixie ducked down so that her face wasn't right next to the cloud. "OK," she said. "Continue."

The pegasus bucked as hard as he could. When his hooves contacted the cloud, there was a clap of thunder and a startled yelp of pain. Trixie's mane and tail were standing on end. She coughed up a small cloud of smoke. "Are you alright?" the pegasus asked. "Should I try again?"

"N-no..." Trixie said hoarsely. "Being struck by lightning once today was enough. It's a small raincloud. It'll run out of water soon."

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The raincloud did not run out of water soon. If one thing could be said about this raincloud, it would be that it was dedicated to its work. It was showing Equestria how raining was supposed to be done and it wasn't letting anything like physics get in its way.

Half an hour, and many strange stares later, Trixie was wearily approaching the spa and didn't know how much more she could take. The raincloud was bad. The bad luck constantly happening was worse. Open manholes, falling tree branches, that dog and cat again! But it didn't matter anymore. Trixie had made it. Here was the spa. Mrs. Dimmer would come

with the money. Trixie would take a bath. Then she would go to bed and forget this terrible day ever happened.

‘Spa closed for repairs’ was written on the sign.

Trixie felt something snap. She laughed. What a funny joke. She turned from the spa and stumbled. Her head felt heavy and she was having difficulty controlling her breathing. Why was everything suddenly so blurry? Trixie took a few more steps and stopped. She forced her breathing to slow and tried to calm down. It was hard but the world slowly came back into focus. Trixie didn’t know what to do. No. That wasn’t right. She did know what to do. She laughed again then said, “Can this day get any worse?”

There. She said it. For the second time today she had taunted fate. She wasn’t scared. The day couldn’t get any worse. She had reached its peak. Anything further could only be a minor annoyance compared to what had happened so far. “Well?” she said. “Come on fate. Show Trixie what you’ve got!”

Nothing happened except for a few ponies giving her strange looks as they passed. Trixie laughed triumphantly and started looking around. She had beaten fate. There was no way this... day... could...

Trixie stared in disbelief. The day had just gotten worse.

There she was. The cyan pegasus with the rainbow mane. The one that had booed her. The one that was at the very top of the long list of ways Trixie’s life had started going downhill.

There she was. On the poster on the wall in front of Trixie. An advertisement for the Worst Baker in Equestria Competition. The smug look on that pegasus’ as she asked if you had what it takes to be the worst.

There she was. The pegasus that had ruined Trixie’s life.

Trixie turned from the poster. She closed her eyes, held her breath and began to count upwards. One... two... three... This had to be a joke. Rainbow Doofus on a poster? Trixie wasn’t even on a poster. Twelve... thirteen... fourteen... Why was she even in that competition? Was she just showing off like she had tried to do on Trixie’s stage? Thirty-one... thirty-

two... thirty-three... How had this happened? How was that pegasus a celebrity? How had everything gone so bad for Trixie? How? Fifty-five... fifty-six... HOW? Sixty-four... sixty-five... **HOW?**

How? It was the only question on Trixie's mind. Trixie's lungs burned as she finally has to stop counting and breathe. She gasped for air. Her body was shaking. "You," she said quietly.

An earth pony stallion passing in front of Trixie stopped. He raised an eyebrow in confusion at the distressed mare.

"You!" Trixie yelled. Her eyes were filled with rage. Everywhere she looked it was nothing but rainbows laughing at her. The stallion took a step back, his ears drooping in fear.

"How dare you! My life was fine until you showed up!"

A crowd had started to gather to watch what was going on. The stallion being yelled at by the crazy mare looked around in fear and confusion as the crowd blocked him in.

"You started booing for no good reason! It was a magic show! Of course I was doing magic!"

The crowd began whispering amongst themselves and shooting disapproving glances at the cornered stallion.

"Yes, I had to make up lies! Only because you were turning everyone against me! You even came up on stage and started acting like some spoiled attention-seeking filly!"

The crowd gasped. The stallion's eye bulged and he quickly shook his head at the crowd to try and say that wasn't true.

Trixie had had enough. She wanted to yell more but there was no more words left. There was only one thing left she could do. She screamed. A loud, primal scream of frustration, anger and sadness. A scream that had been building ever since the ura had destroyed her home. A scream that had been bottled up and forced down repeatedly until it could no longer be contained. The crowd scattered. The stallion ran with tears in his eyes. The

raincloud decided now would be a good time to rain on something else far away.

Trixie screamed until her breath was gone. When she was done she felt... better. All the pent up emotions she had been carrying for so long were gone. She felt new; reborn. Trixie turned around and looked at the poster. It was foolish to think that all of her problems had come from this one mare. There had been many bad choices made that day. Some of them had been Trixie's. Not all, but some. Ponyville... didn't matter. There was no desire for revenge. No need of retribution. But still.

That smug look on... Rainbow Dash. That was her name. That smug look on Rainbow Dash's face. She honestly thought she was going to win. That there would be no competition against her. Trixie wished she could be the one to show up that pegasus. Give her a challenge. Make her sweat a little. Show her that sometimes there is just someone better than you.

Trixie sighed. She wasn't a bad baker. She was actually quite good. It didn't matter though. The bakers in that competition all had an aura of bad luck that made anything they tried to make turn out terrible. Without that aura, Trixie didn't stand a chance. Without that bad luck aura...

Trixie blinked her eyes and then started to laugh. Not a haughty laugh. Not a sarcastic laugh. It was a laugh filled with mirth. A laughter of pure joy that Trixie had almost forgotten she knew how to do. Oh, now this was a good joke. And one not being played on her either. Trixie read the poster. The competition was in two days. Just enough time to head to the tryouts, get a spot in the preliminaries and make her way to Ponyville.

Trixie turned from the poster. Watch out, Rainbow Dash. The Great and Powerful Trixie is coming for you. She'll give you all the competition you've ever wanted.

# The Preliminaries

## Chapter One

### All Work And No Sleep Makes Luna Drink Coffee

Princess Luna flew through the night air above Canterlot. The moon was slowly setting and her night was coming to its end. Luna's research had not been going well and she had hoped a night flight would have helped shake loose some new ideas. It hadn't. However, any excuse to get out and see Equestria after dark was worth it. Equestria was so different now than it had been one thousand years ago. The nights were filled with ponies going about their business; whether they be staying up late, getting up early, or suffering from insomnia.

Luna changed her course and began heading back towards the palace. Today was going to be a very good day. A fun day. A day spent among the masses, putting her theories to the test and hopefully finding her lack of sleep this past month had been worth it. It would be a day where she wouldn't accidentally set fire to anything important. Or knock over a library's book shelves like a row of dominoes. Or change a pony into a woodchuck. Which was an honest misunderstanding and she changed him back right away and apologized, so there really was no reason to get so upset and- Luna took a calming breath. No, today wouldn't be like that. Today was going to be a good day. After all, it wasn't everyday that Luna got to enter a competition.

The Worst Bakers in Equestria. At first Luna had thought it a joke, but the pony that had explained it to her had sounded serious. An actual competition where the objective was to perform as badly as possible. Luna had to see this. Even better. Luna also the weird inability to bake that would allow her to compete. Or at least she thought she did. She had baked bad enough at her tryout to earn a spot in the preliminaries but things hadn't

gone as bad as they had before. After the tryout, Luna had decided to pass the time until the competition by learning all she could about what made a bad baker a, well, bad baker. It was a decision she quickly came to regret.

Luna's studies into the bad baking phenomenon were difficult at best and a complete and utter waste of time at worst. Finding and renting a private kitchen had been a difficult but necessary task after word had gotten around the palace of her soup fiasco. She had tried to replicate the results of her original cooking experiment many times. Frustratingly, each pot of soup had turned out even more delicious than the last. Whatever the magic was that Luna had felt that one time, soup wasn't bringing it out anymore. But soup didn't matter. This was a baking competition, after all.

Luna's attempts at baking were equally frustrating. She had tried to make a simple batch of brownies fifteen times. She had been able to sense the magic during some but not all of her attempts. Five times her brownies had turned out fine. Four times they had been slightly bad looking but edible. Three times they had come out burned, with one of those times being before she had even put them in the oven. Two times the brownies hadn't even survived long enough to get into the oven. And one time... well... Luna preferred not to think about that one time.

There was apparently some way to control just how much bad luck the magic gave and even a way to make it affect things other than baking. Luna just had no idea how. The harder she tried to locate the source of the bad baking magic, the more frustrated she got. The more frustrated she got, the harder she tried to locate the source of the magic. It had become a nightly routine of hers that only ended with the banging of her head on a table when the frustration became too much. She had already ran out of excuses why nearly every table in the palace library now had dents in them. Luna desperately hoped that being surrounded by some of the other worst bakers in Equestria would shed some insight into her research.

Luna landed on a balcony and trotted inside the palace. Her plans were set. All she had to do was sneak out of the palace, join the competition, study the bad bakers without drawing attention to herself, make it into the final eight, study the worst of the worst, find some way to raise the moon without alerting her sister, fail to hide the enormous amount of magic required to raise the moon, find an excuse to tell her sister when she showed up at the competition after sensing the enormous amount of



magic required to raise the moon, and then die of embarrassment when all of Equestria finds out that the Moon Princess had been disguising herself for months so that she could do menial labor. It was an absolutely terrible plan but it was better than the last three revisions. Still, it wouldn't do. Luna would just have to improvise today. She would start by getting her things and sneaking out before the sunrise. No pony will be the wiser and there would be no-

“Good morning, dear Sister.”

-trouble.

Luna turned towards a doorway and saw her sister smiling at her. “Sister?” Luna said nervously and then quickly regained her composure. “Good morning, Tia. So nice to see you. I would expect you to be preparing to raise the sun.”

“As you're so fond of saying, ‘I can do that from anywhere’,” Celestia said with a chuckle. “I was really hoping to find you before you disappeared into your studies again. We haven't shared a morning meal in some time. I know it's silly, but it feels like you're trying to avoid me.”

Luna's eyes opened wide. Her sister knew she was trying to avoid her! Well... Luna hadn't been trying to avoid her. She had just been busy. Still, she should have found time, if only to avoid suspicions today. Suspicions she was only making worse by standing there staring at her sister instead of answering.

“I would love to join you for dinner- I mean breakfast- I mean my third meal of the day and your first!” Luna said, giving Celestia her biggest ‘I'm not planning anything and I'm definitely not being suspicious’ smile.

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Luna and Celestia were sitting at their personal dining table. The rising sun could be seen through the window. Celestia was eating a bowl of oatmeal garnished with fresh fruits. Luna was also eating oatmeal, but the chefs had fried it into thin crispy cakes and served it as part of a fruit salad. It amazed Luna that she and her sister were basically eating the same

thing, even though the food looked, and likely tasted, completely different. Perhaps she could persuade the chefs to let her into the kitchens again. As an observer this time. Surely by now they had forgotten about the soup she had made that had driven Main Course, the head chef of the day kitchen, into an early retirement.

“So,” Luna said, breaking the silence. “What are your plans for the day?”

“Oh, the usual. Meetings for most of the morning followed by a talk with Professor Bastion to discuss the expansion of the university grounds. Then petitions throughout the afternoon.”

“Well that sounds... incredibly boring to be honest.”

Celestia laughed warmly. “It most certainly will be. I’m hoping I can finish everything up quickly. After all, the Worst Baker in Equestria competition is tonight.”

Luna nearly choked on her food. She swallowed hard then asked innocently, “T-the what?”

“The WBE’s,” Celestia replied. “It’s a baking competition where the objective is to be the worst baker instead of the best. I saw it the last time they were held in Canterlot. It was quite entertaining. Rainbow Dash is the current champion and is going for her third straight win this year. You remember her, don’t you?”

“Of course. It’s hard to forget Rainbow Dash once you’ve met her. Or any of your student’s friend for that matter.”

“But our duties are to the ponies of Equestria,” Celestia said with a touch of disappointment in her voice. “It wouldn’t be right for me to rush my responsibilities just for my own personal enjoyment.”

Luna started feeling guilty. Her sister was trying to get her to confess but it wouldn’t work. Luna quickly said, “Oh my! Look at the time. It’s been wonderful talking with you, Sister, but I really must be heading to my room. I have plenty of books to hit before I retire for the day. Literally, of course. I’m afraid some of the older tomes have been infested with book worms

and good whack is the only way to get them out. So ignore any loud noises coming from my room for the next hour or so.”

“Oh... alright,” Celestia said with a touch of sadness.

Luna got up from the table and knocked her seat over. She attempted to right it but tilted it too far and knocked it over again. Through the clatter of Luna’s increasingly noisy attempt to right the seat, Celestia calmly ate her oatmeal. Finally, Luna grabbed the seat with her magic, righted it and set it next to the table. There was an uncomfortable silence for several seconds as Luna stared at Celestia, who was still focused on her morning meal.

“Good day, Sister,” Luna said with a bow of her head. She turned towards the doorway and left her sister to her breakfast.

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Luna nodded politely to the palace guards she passed on her way to her room. She walked at a speed she hoped would be interpreted as a purposeful stride and not a blind panic. Her sister had known she was planning to sneak out today. Not only that, but Celestia had also known where she was planning on going today. OK, maybe she hadn’t come out and accused Luna of anything, but there can only be so many coincidences.

Maybe Luna should come clean. Just walk back to her sister and say, ‘I’m going to disguise myself and enter the WBE’s today. Oh, and I’ve been doing things like things like this behind your back for nearly the past year.’ Luna blinked at how stupid that sounded. The worst part was, her sister wouldn’t get mad. She wouldn’t even be disappointed. She would smile and say how happy she was that Luna was enjoying herself interacting with the ponies of Equestria. Then her sister would encourage her to continue but to do so without a disguise. To go out and let Equestria experience the real Luna; to make some friends. Which, truthfully, wouldn’t be so bad, but she was supposed to be ruling Equestria along with her sister. Not going on random adventures. True, most nights there was little that required her attention. But, eventually, the Lunar Court would grow in popularity and she would be just as busy as Celestia. Maybe even busier. Then Celestia would be the one with all the free time to sneak out of the palace.

Luna sighed as she reached her door. Today was sounding like such a fun day, but now? No. Today would still be a fun day. She just had to sneak out and enjoy herself like she was planning. Luna locked her door behind her and used her magic to pull a saddlebag from under her bed. It was a simple brown bag, not at all like something a princess would use and therefore ideal for her purposes. She began to add items to the bags. Maps of Ponyville and the surrounding area, a marker, glasses; every good disguise needed them, adhesive medical strips, some rope; it was incredibly useful when needed, and a hat. She doubted she would use most of them, but better to be prepared than sorry. Luna then grabbed the last item she would add to her bags. This item was of vital importance.

Being a goddess had its perks. One of them being not needing nearly as much sleep as an ordinary pony. Luna actually didn't need any sleep at all but she started feeling wonky if she went too long without it. How much sleep had she gotten this past week? Or this past month even? It didn't matter because she had the magical answer to staying awake as long as she wanted right here. Luna packed with love and care a thermos filled with the greatest invention ponykind had made during her thousand years of absence: coffee.

With her bags packed, Luna removed her crown, necklace and shoes. She could disguise them with magic, but such personal items would act as a beacon for Celestia to follow if she chose to. Luna didn't need to make it any easier for her sister to find her. She slid on her saddlebags and opened her window.

"Good morning, Princess Luna!" a passing pegasus guard said.

Luna smiled and waved. Her sister had the guards watching her! Well... no... the guards were likely just doing their patrols. She should have been gone while it was still dark. She would have been gone while it was still dark if Tia hadn't felt the need for sisterly bonding. Tia wouldn't have felt the need for sisterly bonding if Luna hadn't been so caught up in her studies. Luna sighed. This deception had gone on for far too long. She would tell her sister the truth tonight. But for now she had a contest to get to and research to complete. She had to find a way out of the palace now or she was going to be late.

A different escape plan would be needed. Luna looked at the magic detecting rune on her balcony. It had been replaced during an inspection earlier that month. The poor unicorn that did the inspection was nearly in tears when she had found out that the Moon Princesses' bedroom had been unprotected. Luna confessing to tampering with the rune had just made the whole scene awkward. Sneaking out had sometimes been difficult after that, but Luna had developed a new trick.

Short-range focused-based teleportation anchor. There was an official name for it that Luna could never remember. Probably because it had way more syllables than any word should have been allowed. It basically meant that she had bound a small part of her magic in an object and with a simple spell, relatively speaking as an alicorn, Luna could transport the object to her or she to it. The best part was, the runes around the palace weren't designed to detect this type of magic. Closing her eyes, Luna cast the retrieval spell and felt a weight around her neck. Luna opened her eyes and looked in her mirror. She was now wearing that beautiful necklace she had purchased from the shopping district a month ago. She lifted the necklace off of her with magic. Time to get this show started.

With bags and magical focus ready, Luna cautiously moved to her window. She watched the pegasus guards making their rounds. When she was sure nopony was looking, she sent the necklace flying towards the palace gardens. Then she waited. After she was sure no guards had entered the gardens looking for falling objects, she started to relax. Phase one complete.

Luna closed her eyes and focused on the necklace. She mentally reached out for it and willed herself towards it. She heard the rustling of leaves in the wind and the chirping of song birds. The wonderful smell of flowers drifted to her nose. Luna opened her eyes and took in the beautiful sights of the royal gardens. She glanced around and didn't see any guards or gardeners rushing to apprehend her. It looked like phase two was a success. Now she just had to grab her necklace. It should have been right in front of- Luna looked down into a pair of brown eyes. She jumped back in surprise, ready to use her magic to bind and gag. But, it wasn't a pony looking up at her, it was a monkey; holding her necklace. Luna sighed in relief.

“Hello little cutie. Are you holding my necklace for me?” Luna asked the monkey sweetly.

The monkey responded by screeching at her then running and climbing up a tree. Luna looked up at the monkey holding her necklace.

“Oh, come on,” Luna said as she moved under the tree. “I don’t want to have to fight a monkey today but I will if you leave me no other choice.”

Luna used her magic to grab a hold of the necklace and gave a quick tug. The monkey held tight and hissed at her. Luna prepared to pull harder, then stopped and rolled her eyes. She willed the necklace to her. A look of confusion came over the monkey’s face as the necklace vanished and reappeared on Luna’s neck.

Luna looked smugly at the monkey. “Looks like I win this round.”

The monkey bared its fangs and leapt at Luna. She yelped in surprise and barely dodged the falling ball of fur and teeth. She quickly turned invisible and took off into the air. She hoped she was far enough away from any magic detecting runes. As she cleared the palace walls, Luna mentally added ‘taunting monkeys’ to her list of things not to do.

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Luna continued to fly until she was near Ponyville. The massive stadium that would hold the contest was in the distance. She landed and, when she was sure nopony was near, dropped her invisibility spell along with her bags. This morning was far more stressful than it should have been but the worst was over. Luna found and removed her thermos of coffee from her bags. She took a sip and enjoyed the almost too hot brew. Her own personal blend. Luna considered magical always-heated thermos’ to be the second greatest invention Equestria had ever made.

It was time for a disguise. Luna’s horn began to glow and then vanished. Standing where Luna had been was an earth pony with a light brown coat, dark orange mane and a pile of coffee beans for a cutie mark. Morning Dew, she called herself. Luna sighed. This was likely going to be the last time she would be able to use this disguise. Once she confessed to her sister, it just wouldn’t feel right using it anymore. If this was to be

Morning Dew's final day, then Luna would make sure it was the best day ever.

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Luna sighed in relief as she approached the stadium. There was still a long line of ponies waiting to get in. She hadn't missed her chance to enter the preliminaries. Luna trotted up to the end of the line and waited. The line was moving slowly, with one pony being admitted or turned away every few minutes. Luna took a peak and guessed there was still a few dozen ponies in front of her. She pulled out her thermos and took another sip of coffee. It was going to be a long morning.

After a few more ponies had entered the stadium and a couple turned away, Luna began to notice a shape on the horizon. The shape slowly got closer until she recognized it as a pony. The pony was heading straight for Luna but moving very slowly. She watched the pony as its features became more visible as it got closer. It was obviously a mare. She had an azure coat with a lighter mane and tail. She was wearing a magician's cape and hat that were a purple color with a field of stars and sparkles on it. Probably a unicorn then. As the pony got closer, Luna could sense the magic inside her. Definitely a unicorn. The unicorn walked up to Luna and took the spot behind her in line. Her hat and cape looked scuffed and she had tired bags under her eyes.

Luna set down her thermos. "Are you alright?" she asked.

"Just fine... just fine..." the unicorn said wearily. "Up all night... chased by squirrels... so many squirrels... made it in time. Need to bake... only way to drain bad luck..."

Drain bad luck? What did that mean? What the bad luck magic like a constantly filling pool that was used up as a pony baked? Is that why sometimes her baking turned out OK? She was baking too fast and the pool hadn't been able to refill? Luna was excited. Maybe she would find the answers she was looking for today after all.

Luna decided to see if she could get the unicorn talking more. "So, ah... anyways. My name's Morning Dew. What's yours?"

“Trixie,” the unicorn said. She seemed to be having a hard time standing up straight.

“You look tired from all that late night... squirrel... activity. I have some coffee here.” Luna nodded her head towards the thermos. “You’re welcome to some if you’d like.”

Trixie leaned down and bit onto the thermos’ rim. She must have been really tired if she couldn’t even manage telekinesis.

“Only take a sip. I like it a bit stronger than most ponies and- you just drank all of it.”

The thermos fell away from Trixie’s lips. Her eyes opened wide and her whole body began to vibrate.

“I can see everything,” Trixie whispered.

“It seems I don’t know the definition of ‘a bit’. It also worries me that I felt I made the coffee a little too weak earlier.”

Trixie was beginning to make a high pitched whine.

“OK, don’t worry. I can fix this. Can you close your eyes?”

Trixie slowly shook her head right and left.

“Right. That’s not a good sign. Um...” Luna bit onto the edge of Trixie’s hat and pulled it forward to cover the unicorn’s eyes. “Any better?”

Trixie slowly moved her head up and down.

“Good. This next bit is important. Try to relax and ignore any strange feelings you may have in your stomach for the next minute or two.”

Luna looked around. No pony seemed to be paying attention to them. Luna reached out with her magic and took a hold of the coffee in Trixie’s stomach. With a gurgle from Trixie, the coffee was magically transported somewhere else. Trixie’s whine lowered in pitch and volume until it had stopped. Luna was relieved. Accidentally causing a pony’s heart to explode



from coffee overload would have made this a very bad day. Luna also decided not to think about the number of coffee based spells she had learned during her adventures.

# Chapter Two

## The Bestest Announcers Ever!

“Yay! We really are the bestest announcers ever! This is so exciting!” Pinkie Pie said as she hopped through the fields north of Ponyville.

“You said it, Pinkie,” Spike said as he walked with the bouncing pony.

“I can’t believe we get to be the announcers at the WBE’s! There must have been so many ponies that wanted to do it, but were the ones chosen! Oh! I hope the ponies not picked aren’t sad. I’ll have to throw them a party!”

“With the way we handled the Running of the Leaves, how could we not be chosen? Besides, the WBE’s are in Ponyville this year. That means that we, Ponyville’s best announcing duo, had to accept the job. It’s our responsibility.”

“I like this responsibility. It’s not boring like those cleaning your room or taking out the trash responsibilities. It’s a fun, cheering on your best friend responsibility. But we have to make sure we cheer on the other ponies too. It wouldn’t be fair if Dashie got all the cheering.”

“I think professionals like us can stay unbiased. After all...” Spike stopped walking and held his fist near his mouth, miming holding a microphone. “I’m Spike, the little dragon with the big voice, shouting ‘Helloooooooo’ to Equestria.”

“And I’m Pinkie Pie, the premiere party pony ready to announceify for all of our aspiring bad bakers.”

The pair laughed as they continued towards their destination. “Look!” Pinkie shouted, bouncing even higher. “There’s the stadium. Let’s hurry!”

“Hold up, Pinkie Pie.”

Pinkie stopped bouncing and looked at Spike in confusion.

“We’re big shot announcers now,” Spike said, shining his claws on his chest. “We can’t be seen being all excited over this. We need to play it cool.”

“Ohhh, right. Cool.”

Pinkie walked next to spike. Her eyes were half open and she wore an expression of mild boredom. After a minute she began hopping again. Every time Pinkie’s bouncing got her too far ahead, she would turn back and loop around Spike. Pinkie suddenly stopped in midair. “Wait!” she said then fell back to the ground.

“What is it?”

“Twitchy-tail! Twitchy-tail!”

Spike cringed and hid under Pinkie. “Where is it?” he asked. “What’s falling?”

Pinkie looked around in the air. “There!” she said.

Spike and Pinkie watched as the brown liquid fell from the air and splattered a few feet away. “All gone!” Pinkie announced as she started hopping again.

Spike sniffed the liquid then looked around for any passing pegasi. “Coffee from nowhere? That has to be the weirdest thing you’ve ever predicted falling.”

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Spike took in the stadium as he got closer. It was big. He then decided that wasn’t an accurate enough description and updated it to: it was huge. The stadium was circular in shape and stretched into the air, higher than even the tallest building in Ponyville. It could probably even give some of the towers in Canterlot a run for their money.

The stadium had four giant entrances, each with a WBE banner hanging above it. There were ponies busy roping off a parameter around

the front. There was a long line near the left most entrance. Those must have been the ponies entered into the preliminaries. Spike wondered who was going to make it into the competition along with Rainbow Dash this year. He and Pinkie began heading towards the right most entrance.

Spike couldn't wait to see inside. He had to get up into the announcer's booth and take in the sight of all the seats that would soon be filled. This stadium must have sat hundreds- no thousands- maybe even tens of thousands of ponies. The cheer of the crowd as they'd hang on his and Pinkie's every word. Announcing from a balloon over the Whitetail Wood was fun but this was going to be amazing.

Ahead of Spike was a unicorn. He was levitating short poles and placing them every couple of feet. He would then string a rope from the previous pole to the one he had just placed. He stopped what he was doing and watched the duo. Spike gave a friendly wave as he passed by. After a few moments, Spike became aware that, while he was walking, he wasn't moving forward anymore; he was actually moving backwards.

Spike and Pinkie were floated back in front on the unicorn and set on the ground. Spike knew what was going on. "Hello, my good sir," Spike said with a bow. "I know it must be quite a sight seeing two as famous as us just strolling past, but you could have just asked if you wanted an autograph."

Pinkie gasped. "We get to give autographs? Today keeps getting better!"

The unicorn was taken aback. "Er... I'm not after your autographs," he said. "I stopped you because the stadium isn't open to the general public yet."

"Completely understood," Spike said as he pulled out a ticket with fancy gold ink. "As you can see, these tickets mark us as VIPs. Not only that, but we are the announcers for tonight."

Pinkie Pie nodded, her ticket in her mouth. The unicorn looked at the tickets and said, "They look legit, but VIP or not, nopony gets in until this evening. Besides, the announcers are already here."

"Well, it's a good thing tha- wait, what was that last part?"

“Our announcers are already here. They arrived yesterday.”

Pinkie was shocked. “Spike,” she said. “What’s going on? I thought we were the announcers.”

“We are! Rainbow Dash said she’d get us the spot.”

“I don’t understand. How can we be inside if we’re out here? There aren’t two of me. At least I don’t think there are. Hmm.”

Spike didn’t want to think about two Pinkie Pies running around. “This can only mean one thing,” he said. “Impostors!”

“Impostors? Oh no! Why would anyone impostor us? Don’t they know how sad they’ll make everypony when they find out it isn’t us doing the announcing? We have to do something.”

“You’re right, Pinkie. We need to figure out a way to sneak inside and expose those impostors for who they are! Whoever they are!”

“Right! But how are we going to get past the guard?”

The unicorn had had about enough of this. “I’m right here, you know? I can hear you planning about trying to sneak past me.”

Spike looked the unicorn up and down. “Pinkie Pie, I think you know how to handle this one.”

“Right,” Pinkie said as she waltzed up to the unicorn, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “I know what will take care of you.”

The unicorn gulped as he attempted to stare down the pink pony. It was time to prove himself. This was one minimum wage job he wasn’t going to lose. “How would you like…” Pinkie said as she got very close. “A cupcake!”

The unicorn took a startled step back. He looked at the treat balancing on the pink pony’s upturned hoof. “Miss? Are you trying to bribe your way in with a baked good?”

“Bribe?” Pinkie had a confused look on her face. “I just thought you looked hungry.”

“Well... yes. I am a bit hungry. I haven’t even had breakfast yet. Thank you for the cupcake. But this doesn’t mean I’m letting you inside.”

The unicorn levitated the cupcake and took a bite. He chewed and swallowed. It was a very good cupcake. Absolutely delicious. He quickly finished it off. “Well that was very good,” he said, licking his lips.

Spike nodded then said, “There are more where that came from at Sugarcube Corner. It’s a confectionery in Ponyville. You should go check it out.”

“Maybe for lunch. For now I need to get back to work and you need to...” The unicorn looked to Spike’s side and noticed another cupcake. A few feet behind that cupcake was another and then another. The trail of cupcakes led to the pink pony, who was setting down another one.

“Are you creating a trail of cupcakes in order to try and lead me away so you can sneak past?” the unicorn asked. Today had taken a turn for the weird and he was having trouble keeping up.

Pinkie gasped, her eyes opening wide. She turned towards the dragon. “Spike!” she whisper-yelled. “He’s on to me! Distract him!”

“Right!” Spike said as he saluted. “So, lovely weather we’re having today, huh? It’s all thanks to Ponyville’s weather team, led by none other than Rainbow Dash. Perhaps you heard of her? She is the current champion of the WBE’s. We’re her friends. Oh! I probably should have gone with that first. We know Rainbow Dash. You should let us in.”

“I don’t care if you know the WBE’s owner herself. I’m not letting you inside! Now, tell your friend to pick up these cupcakes and leave so I can get back to work.”

The unicorn glared at the pink pony. Something was wrong, though. She looked different. She was standing with her left side facing him. She was on three hooves with her right front leg held out in front of her. Her

head was facing forward but slightly tilted toward the left so both of her eyes could be seen. It looked creepy. "Miss? What are you..."

A light breeze blew by and the pink pony fell over. Cardboard! The unicorn looked at the dragon. "How did she-" he started to ask but the purple dragon had been replaced by a cardboard cutout too. The unicorn turned around in time to see a spot of purple and pink disappear inside the stadium. He sighed, levitated a cupcake and then went back to setting up the rope. He wasn't paid enough for this.

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Spike and Pinkie Pie were laughing as they walked through the stadium's hallways. "Oh man," Spike said as he wiped a tear from his eye. "I wish I could have seen the look on his face when he realized we had pulled the old swap places with a cardboard cutout gag."

"He was probably all. Hwuh? Whahuh?" Pinkie said, making weird faces and then giggling.

Spike scratched his chin with his claws and looked around. "Now... if I were a dressing room, where would I be?"

"Well, If I were a dressing room, I'd be down that hall up ahead, take the second left and straight on until you see the doors with stars on them," Pinkie said. "Although I'm glad I'm not a dressing room, cause then I couldn't be an announcer. Unless I was some sort of talking dressing room, but that would just be silly."

Spike followed Pinkie's directions and found the dressing rooms. He didn't ask how she knew. Her being Pinkie Pie was explanation enough. There were two dressing room doors about five feet apart. Both had a circular plate with a star on in hanging in the middle. Spike walked up to the door on the left.

"Alright. Time he get to the bottom of this," Spike said as he raised his fist to knock on the door.

"Spike, wait! That door has to 'Do Not Disturb' sign on it."

“So?”

“So? Only Rudely McRudersons knock on a door that has a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign on it. You’re not a Rudely McRuderson, are you?”

Spike drew his fist back to knock, held it in the air then lowered it and looked downcast. “No...” he said.

“That a boy, Spike. I’m proud of you!”

“So what do we do now?”

“The door on the right doesn’t have a sign. You can knock on it.”

Spike brighten up. “Well why didn’t you say so?”

“I did say so, silly!”

“It’s just an- aw, never mind. Let’s find out what’s going on here,” Spike said as he pounded on the door. He waited and was about to pound on the door again, when it opened.

An earth pony with a brown coat and dark brown mane was on the other side of the door. He stared at spike in confusion. “Can I help you?” he asked.

Spike squinted his eyes and stared at the earth pony. After a minute, Spike said, “You don’t look a thing like either of us!”

“He might use paint,” Pinkie said.

“I... what?” the earth pony said.

“OK, OK. Enough chitchat,” Spike said as he gave the earth pony an angry stare. “We know you’re an impostor here to take one of our places as announcer, so you better come clean.”

“Yeah!” Pinkie agreed. “We have soap! We also have balloons, rubber bands and markers.”



“And she knows how to use them!”

“Grr!” Pinkie said as she struck a dramatic pose.

The earth pony opened his mouth and then blinked several times. Spike and Pinkie gave him time to formulate his thoughts. This was the standard response to someone new meeting Pinkie Pie for the first time.

“What?”

That was one of the standard replies. The earth pony tried again.

“You must be confused. I am not an impostor. My name is Regal Din. I was asked to be an announcer a few weeks ago and accepted. I am certainly not pretending to be a baby dragon or a pink mare.”

Pinkie stared at Regal with a raised eyebrow then looked towards Spike. “Something strange is going on here, Spike. How can he be an announcer when we’re the announcers? Are there three announcers?”

“This stadium’s announcing booth only comfortably seats two,” Regal Din said. “My colleague in the room next door is also an announcer. The last I heard, he and I were the only ones working this show.”

“Whoa, hold on,” Spike said. “Four announcers? That can’t be right. There has to be an easy explanation for this. Oh! I know! When Rainbow got us the announcer gig she must have forgot to tell one of the higher ups. Then they asked these guys to be announcers not knowing that the position had already been filled. Such an easy mistake. Don’t take it too hard- Regal, was it? There will be other shows. But for now, you and your friend will have to leave so Pinkie and I can get ready.”

Regal rolled his eyes and slammed the door. Pinkie gasped. “He’s a McRuderson!” she said. “His friend’s probably a McRuderson too! It’s a whole family reunion of McRudersons!”

“Calm down, Pinkie. All we need to do is get him out of there and take over the room for ourselves. If he can’t get ready, then he’ll have no choice but to leave. And I think I know the perfect plan to get us in there...”

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Regal Din was about to sit back down when there was another knock on his door. He sighed, turned around and opened the door again.

“Look, you’re obviously mis... tak...en?”

In front of regal was the pink pony from before except she was wearing a cap, white and blue stripped shirt and khaki pants. She was holding a large brown paper bag in her mouth. She set the bag down.

“I have an alfalfa and cucumber sub here for a Mr. Din,” the pink pony said.

“I... didn’t order a sub?”

“That’s odd. This is the right address. You should let us in so we can figure this out.”

“Me,” the bag said.

“What?” the pink pony asked the bag.

“Let me in.”

“Let you into where, Spike?”

“No. You were supposed to say ‘Let me in’.”

“Ohhh,” the pink pony said, then looked back at regal. “You should let me in so we can figure this out. My talking bag can stay outside.”

Regal shut the door. There was another knock. He opened the door again.

“Did someone call for a plumber?” the baby dragon wearing blue overalls with a red shirt and cap asked. Next to him was the pink pony wearing a similar outfit but with a green shirt and cap.

Regal shut the door. There was another knock. He opened the door again.

"There have been reports of a disturbance," the pink pony wearing a royal guard uniform said.

Regal shut the door. There was another knock. He opened the door again.

The baby dragon was pouring ketchup on the pink pony, who was laying sprawled out on the floor, her eyes closed and tongue hanging out of her mouth. "Oh! Wait," the dragon said. "I wasn't ready yet."

Regal shut the door. There was another knock. He opened the door again.

"Regal!" the pink pony wearing nothing said. "I'm you from the future! You need to come quick in order to prevent a terrible calamity from occurring!"

Regal shut the door. There was another knock. He opened the door again.

The baby dragon and pink pony were wearing scuba suits.

"OK," Regal said. "I admit this was annoying at first but now it's starting to get mildly amusing. Tell me. How was this one supposed to work?"

The pink pony spat out her breather, raised a flippered hoof, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She turned to the baby dragon. "How was this one supposed to work?"

"Why are you asking me? This one was your idea."

Regal shut the door.

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“Urgh,” Spike grunted in frustration as he threw the scuba suit away. “This is getting us nowhere. We need another plan. A real plan.”

Spike started tapping his claw on his chin. Pinkie sat down and rubbed her hoof on her chin. Suddenly, Spike and Pinkie faces lit up.

“I’ve got it!” Spike said.

“Me too!”

“He wants to do this the hard way? We’ll do this the hard way.”

Spike brought his hands to his face and began drumming his claws together. He chuckled wickedly. Pinkie was rolling the tips of her front hooves together and mirroring Spike’s chuckle. They stopped laughing and looked at each other.

“We aren’t thinking the same thing at all, are we?” Spike asked.

“Nopey lopey!”

“Oh well. Two plans are better than one. Lets both do our own thing and see which one works.”

# Chapter Three

## Trixie Bakes In A Story About Baking

Trixie was feeling more awake then she had ever thought possible. The coffee had succeeded in finding her sleepiness, backing it into a corner and then beating the tar out of it. Go coffee! Trixie never drank coffee before. She always thought it made ponies too dependant on it. What a foal she had been. She felt like she could do anything! Why was she standing in this line? She should be running! Or hang-gliding! Or swimming! Or doing long division! Or drinking more coffee! Or-

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What just happened? The line was shorter now and the sun had moved. How odd. Trixie felt great. Her mind was thinking much faster. She wished she had drank that coffee last night. Then when the carriage's wheel had broken she could have thought up a plan to fend off the squirrel army. Then she wouldn't have been captured and forced to work in their underground nut mines for the past eight years; only escaping by chance when-

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Wait, what? What was that about squirrels? Oh yeah, they had chased her when she had set out on her own after the carriage she had rented had lost a wheel. Stupid bad luck. What was with this line? It kept jumping around. And what was that coffee pony saying? 'Are you alright?' What kind of made up language was that? Why didn't she just-

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Trixie awoke with a start and immediately regretted regaining consciousness. Her head hurt. The sun was too bright and the world too loud. She would never drink coffee again as long as she lived. At least she had somehow sleepwaited-in-line. It looked like she was next. The coffee pony was baking something at a table and making a mess. Was this some

sort of pre-test? Good. Trixie needed to bake something and drain her bad luck.

Drain her bad luck. It made no sense, but poison joke didn't seem to make any sense itself, so in a way, it made perfect sense. Trixie had found a way to temporarily remove her bad luck so that she could at least function normally for a couple hours. The way was simple: baking.

When Trixie baked, her bad luck exploded. Not literally, thankfully. It was more like a shook up bottle of soda spraying its entire contents onto the pony that opened it. Which was something Trixie had experienced no less than three times in the past twenty-four hours; one of those times being with a bottle of non-carbonated apple juice.

"Miss? Miss? Are you competing?" one of the judges asked.

Trixie snapped back to reality. The coffee pony gave Trixie a friendly wave before walking towards the stadium. Trixie waved back.

"Miss!"

"Yes, yes. I'm coming," Trixie said as she walked up to the table and the impatient judges.

An earth pony mare and a pegasus stallion were across the table from Trixie. Both were wearing a badge that designated them as official judges of the WBE. From the look of annoyance on the earth pony's face, they had likely drawn the short sticks to be stuck running the pre-testing station. At least the pegasus was attempting to be friendly.

"Please present your signed acceptance form and be quick about it. We already have more competitors than we were supposed to," the earth pony said then turned towards her fellow judge. "Honestly. The tryout stations have been far too generous this year."

"That's why we're out here. To reduce the number to a manageable level," the pegasus said, boredom in his voice. "You already turned away nearly half of the competitors. Now we have less than the expected one hundred."

"It'll just make our jobs easier in the next round of cuts."

Trixie tilted her head forward and let her hat flop onto the table. The earth pony glared at Trixie. "I said present your acceptance form, not your hat. What's wrong with your forehead?"

"I had my form sewn into my hat so I couldn't easily lose it. The spots on my head are just a rash. They aren't contagious."

The earth pony rolled her eyes and looked into the hat. "Your acceptance form is illegible. Thank you for wasting our time. Please try again next year."

"What?" Trixie had been expecting this and was prepared to fight for a spot.

The earth pony sighed then said slowly, "I can not read your acceptance form."

"Hold on, Prism," the pegasus said. "It may be unreadable but it's still an official form. I say give her a chance."

The earth pony turned on the pegasus. "If it was up to you, all of Equestria would be competing. Our job is to narrow it down to the top eight and that means some ponies go home. This form is so covered in sweat and grim that I can't even make out where it came from. The spots on her forehead are likely from where the ink rubbed off. If a pony can't even take proper care of her form then she doesn't deserve to compete. It has to be a unanimous decision between us to get in and I say NO."

"And I say let her bake," a new voice said.

The earth pony turned her anger on the newcomer then quickly gasped and lowered her head. "M-madam Soufflé. I-I didn't think that you'd-"

"Be walking around my own competition's grounds?" Madam Soufflé asked.

Trixie looked at this Madam Soufflé. She was a unicorn wearing a simple cut red dress and had an aura of authority around her. Her coat was a very light purple while her mane and tail were yellow but with a few strands of silver running through them, betraying her age.

“No, it’s just- with the chair-holder meeting about to start-”

“Oh, please. Like I’d want to be stuck in a room with those ponies for longer than I have to. Most of them only care about maximizing profits and that’s not what this competition is about,” Madam Soufflé said, then tuned towards Trixie. “You have a very strange aura surrounding you. I’m curious to see how you bake.”

Trixie gulped and returned her hat to her head. The two judges were rapidly setting up the station for testing. This was it. It was time to see if bad luck from poison joke could fool these three official ponies into believing she had what it took to be in the WBE’s.

Trixie looked at the table in front of her. A bowl of flour with a spoon, a cup of milk, a cup of sugar, an egg and a stick of butter were laid out. She looked up at the judges.

“Combine the ingredients in whatever order you wish,” Madam Soufflé said then gave Trixie a smile. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Trixie wasn’t ready. She didn’t think she could ever be ready for this. Not after what had happened during her tryout. She really hoped nopony started screaming this time. Trixie lifted her hoof, unsteadily reached out and touched the spoon.

The effect was immediate. The gentle breeze that had been blowing moments before stopped. The background noise slowly faded. Birds took to the air. Rabbits hid in their dens. A group of squirrels that had slowly been approaching the azure unicorn suddenly realized that now was a very good time to be a few miles away. The sunlight darkened as if it were shining through a dirty window. The world was silent save for the breathing of four ponies and the beating of their hearts.

The judges took a nervous step back. Their eyes had widened as they fought against their primal instincts telling them to run. Madam Soufflé



seemed interested and unafraid. Trixie was breathing hard. She had started this and needed to see it through to completion. She took her hoof off of the spoon, grabbed the cup of milk in her mouth and then poured it into the flour.

The milk curdled then turned black. It bubbled and began emitting thin wisps of smoke. Trixie tried to ignore the smell as she bit onto the spoon and stirred the horrifying mixture. Her eyes burned from the smoke and tears began to flow, only to be mixed in with the other ingredients. Finally, she could take no more and stepped away from the bowl.

Trixie coughed as thick black clouds of smoke rose from the bowl. The clouds pooled and spread in the sky above them, turning the already darkened world into twilight. Red lights flashed within the clouds as they rumbled ominously. The winds returned, no longer the gentle breeze from before. The mixture stopped smoking. It was ready for the next ingredient.

The cup of sugar shook in Trixie's teeth as she poured it into the bowl. Trixie set the cup down and was about to reach for the spoon when she felt her mane begin to tingle. The bolt of red lightning streaked down through the sky and struck the mixture. Trixie shut her eyes. The bright flash of light had left a jagged line through her vision making it seem as if the world had been torn in two. The bowl shattered, the sugar bubbled; turning brown then black, the egg exploded, the butter melted and burst into flames.

The clouds awakened. Lightning struck the field around them. The winds howled like a dying animal, threatening to blow the ponies away. Trixie raised a hoof to hold onto her hat.

"What have you done?" The voice was next to Trixie but sounded far away. The earth pony was staring at her, eyes wide in fear. "This can't be real!" she said. "Please tell me this is magic!"

"Don't be a foal!" Trixie shouted back, her own voice nearly lost in the wind. "If I were to combine magic with my bad luck now, we wouldn't survive!"

The force of the elements were too much and the table collapsed in on itself. The wood splintered and shattered, reducing the table into mulch.

The dark mixture seeped into the ground. The grass withered and died as the circle of corruption spread. The ponies backed away, afraid of what would happen if they touched the black dirt.

The circle stopped growing after a few feet and then the ground began to rumble. Thick black vines burst from the blackened dirt. The vines twisted around the circle as sharp thorns grew from them. Then, the wind stopped blowing. The clouds rumbled a few more times before breaking apart. The sunlight shined once again.

The ponies stared at the thorn patch. In the center was a single red rose. The rose opened into the sunlight. Trixie looked into the rose and her breath caught in her throat. She had never known that such beauty could exist. And then, after only a few moments of life, the rose wilted, dropping its petals to the ground. Sounds returned to the world but the ponies remained silent for a time.

“Well done,” Madam Soufflé said softly. She turned to Trixie and spoke louder. “I have seen ponies with your... condition... attempt to enter my competition before. I’m please to say that you are the first I will allow to join. Don’t think this will be easy for you, though. So many bad bakers in one place can cause unexpected outcomes. However, I think with a lot of determination and a little bit of luck, you’ll do just fine. Remember, this competition is a stage and you are the actor. It isn’t about winning, it’s about giving the audience a show they’ll talk about for the rest of their lives. Too many ponies seem to have forgotten that.”

Madam Soufflé began walking towards the stadium. “Enter her into the finals,” she said to the judges. “I think she’s proven herself capable.”

“But, Madam Soufflé,” the pegasus said. “It takes a unanimous vote of the judges to let a pony skip the preliminaries and there is only two of us out here.”

“Then find the other judges and tell them I told you to make the vote unanimous,” Madam Soufflé said without stopping.

Trixie was amazed. She did it. She got a spot in the finals. It was a good thing too. After that display, it would be several hours before her bad luck could recharge. She would have to try and pace herself during the

competition. Making it through the quarter-finals only to have no bad luck remaining for the semi-finals, let alone the finals, would be disastrous.

The earth pony said something.

“What was that?” Trixie asked.

“W-who are you?” the earth pony said with a haunted look in her eyes.

“Me?” Trixie laughed. “I am the Great and All-Powerful Trixie! Remember that name, for soon it shall be on the lips of every pony in Equestria!”

# Chapter Four

## I'm A Sidekick!

Ditzy was feeling anxious. She was standing alone in the corner of the WBE's waiting room. She had really hoped there would be more ponies here that she knew. As it was, the only other pony from Ponyville in the competition was Rainbow Dash. Miss Dash was a neat pony and nice enough to Ditzy, but she kept disappearing into the stadium, so Ditzy was unable to speak with her. Miss Dash was the champion and that meant she could go where ever she pleased. Ditzy, however, was still in the preliminary stage so she had to remain in the waiting area. It was a nice enough room. There were comfy seats, snacks and things to read. But the only thing you could really do in the room was wait. Ditzy had been doing a lot of waiting lately.

Ditzy had arrived at the stadium bright and early the day before the competition had started. Unfortunately, arriving early did not mean she could enter the stadium, get a spot, compete or win earlier. Ditzy had to wait.

Ditzy tried to keep her mind occupied by playing a game. She counted the number of blades of grass in a square area. She then ordered the count by the lengths of the blades of grass. She had then gotten hungry and ate some of the grass. She was then sad when she realized that her numbers were now hopelessly incorrect and she would have to start over.

It was about then that Ditzy's friend, Carrot Top, had shown up and brought Dinky with her. Ditzy was incredibly happy to see her daughter again. The trio had a picnic that tasted much better than grass. It even had muffins! It then started to get late and Dinky was getting sleepy. Dinky had wanted to stay and sleep outside with her mommy, but Ditzy had insisted she got a good nights sleep in a bed. Carrot Top had left, she would watch over Dinky and keep her safe. Tomorrow they would come to the competition and sit in the front row seats that Ditzy had purchased. The day had come to its end and Ditzy had fallen asleep. The next morning she had awoken with a thud.

The thud wasn't from Ditzzy falling out of her hammock this time. It was instead from a pair of judges setting up a table. The stadium's grounds were full of activity as ponies got everything ready for tonight. Ditzzy was happy she got to be first in line. The judges had said that there had never been a contestant that had camped out overnight before. So, Ditzzy was first in that too! Ditzzy had mixed ingredients together for the judges. After they had finished scrapping off the dough from their faces, they had said she passed and gave her a number. Number one! Being number one didn't mean Ditzzy had won the competition, though. It meant she had got to be in the first group of ponies to be tested inside, the first to enter the waiting room, and the first to wait for all the other ponies to finish.

It was hour number three of waiting when a pony approached Ditzzy. This made Ditzzy happy. Talking to the other ponies was fun. One of Ditzzy's eyes looked at the approaching Pony. She was an earth pony with a light brown coat and dark orange mane. Ditzzy's other eye observed the approaching Pony. This caused Ditzzy's eyes to widen in shock.

"Hi! I saw you standing over here by yourself. My name's Morning Dew. What's yours?"

Ditzzy crouched her front legs and lowered her head into the best bow she could manage. "Ditzzy Doo, your highness."

The royal pony's mouth hung open. Her head darted around the room and she looked down at herself. She nervously said, "What- ah... why do you call me 'your highness'? I'm not that tall. Ha ha." She then lowered herself and whispered at Ditzzy, "What are you doing?"

"I'm bowing!" Ditzzy whispered back.

"Why?"

"Because I'm supposed to bow to the Princesses. It's the rules."

"Please stop bowing."

"OK!"

Ditzy got up. She had successfully obeyed a royal command! It had always been a fear of Ditzy's that one of the Princesses would ask her to do something she was unable to. But this had been easy. Ditzy eagerly awaited her next task.

"Now, what's this about me being a princess?" the Princess asked softly.

"It's because you're Princess Luna. Everypony know that Princess Luna is a princess."

Princess Luna looked around again and laughed nervously. Ditzy's ears popped and all the other noise in the room suddenly became muffled.

"OK, I gave us some privacy. Now, I don't understand. No one has been able to see through one of my disguises before. How is it that you did by just looking at me?"

Ditzy was happy. Another easy question! "It's because I'm good at remembering! I can look at one pony and then remember seeing them again later. It's real helpful with delivering mail. Sometimes I see a pony at their friends house and I remember their name. I ask them if they want their mail now. Most of the time they say, 'No, deliver it to my house,' but sometimes they say, 'Yes'! And those times make me really happy because I remembered them!"

"That... makes sense, I guess. But I'm in disguise. How did you see through it?"

"It was difficult at first since you're missing your horn and wings and you're a different color. But then I noticed your eyes."

"My eyes?"

"Yep, not many ponies have the same color eyes as you. I knew I had seen your eyes before so I thought real hard and then noticed your bags!"

"My bags?"

“Yep, they’re real inconspicuous. Exactly the type of bags a princess would use if she was in disguise and didn’t want anypony to know she was a princess. So I went through my head and there was only one pony that had your color eyes and was a princess. And that’s you, Princess Luna!” Ditzzy closed her eyes and started trotting happily in place. She was getting all the answers right!

“That... is actually really impressive detective work. But couldn’t I have just been a pony you’ve never met before that happened to like simple bags?”

Ditzzy stopped her celebration and thought about what Princess Luna had just said. “I suppose so... but then you would have said you weren’t Princess Luna and I would have felt embarrassed for making a mistake.”

Princess Luna hoofed herself between the eyes. “Me and my big mouth,” she said.

Ditzzy was so excited. Another pony she knew was in the competition. And she was a princess! And she was in disguise. This could only mean one thing. Ditzzy gasped.

“Princess Luna? Are you a super hero?”

Princess Luna stared at Ditzzy. “What?”

“A super hero! Mild mannered Morning Dew by day. But by night? Super Luna! With a bolt of lightning, Super Luna appears to save the day!”

Thunder rumbled outside and Ditzzy’s face lit up. The ponies in the room started looking around. Princess Luna looked towards the double doors that led outside.

“That thunder was quite loud to be able to hear it so clearly through my spell,” Princess Luna said as she narrowed her eyes. “I wouldn’t think Ponyville would schedule a storm for the day of a competition.”

Ditzzy was disappointed that Princess Luna hadn’t transformed into Super Luna. But maybe it took more than just thunder. Ditzzy carefully

reached forward and touched Princess Luna's necklace. She then quickly drew back her hoof and watched intently.

"What are you doing?" Luna asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Trying to activate your necklace to change you into Super Luna!"

"What? OK, first off, this disguise is magical and I can cancel it at any time I want. Secondly, my necklace isn't magical. Well... I guess technically it is now since I created a teleportation anchor from it. But it doesn't activate by touching it. I have to think about it in order to teleport myself to it. Anyways, thirdly, I'm not some sort of super hero that goes around Equestria searching for crime to fight."

"Is that why you're here?" Ditzy asked. "Are there bad ponies trying to sneak in to the competition in order to take over Equestria?"

"No, of course not! I mean, I hope not. I'm just here to learn about the competition and how it is that so many ponies have this bad baking ability."

"Oh, I understand. You're on patrol. That's really smart thinking Super Luna."

"Please stop calling me that."

"Right! Can't let your secret identity get out. Then the bad guys can threaten the ones you love and care about. You're secrets safe with me!" Ditzy winked. "Morning Dew."

"Ugh. I'll never be able to convince you I'm not a super hero, will I?"

"Nuh-uh! It makes total sense now. That's why you have magical powers and can fly!"

Princess Luna shook her head. "Only because I'm an alicorn. My sister is one too. Does that make her a super hero?"

Ditzy couldn't believe what she was hearing. Not only had she discovered that Princess Luna was a super hero, but she now knew that Princess Celestia was one too. Ditzy was probably the only pony in



Equestria to know the truth! Princess Luna was hitting herself on the forehead again. Ditzy suddenly became frightened. She was the only pony that knew the truth. She was a danger to their safety. No, to all of Equestria's safety! She had to do something.

"Princess Luna!"

Princess Luna pressed her hoof against her forehead and sighed.  
"You really need to sto-"

"Make me your sidekick!"

"...What?"

"I know your secret identity! I'm a danger if the bad guys catch me! But if I'm your sidekick, then I can be a hero too. Then I could beat up the bad guys and not tell your secret. Please, can I be your sidekick? It's either that you'll have to melt my brain with your heat vision so I'll forget."

"My what vision? I don't want to melt your brain!"

"So I can be your sidekick? I could be The Mail Mare! Or The Muffin Master! I know! Ditzy Doo, the Mare of Mystery!"

Princess Luna opened and closed her mouth several times. She must have been communicating telepathically with her sister. The begging wasn't going good. Ditzy had to do something to save her brain.

"Just for today?" Ditzy pleaded. She tried to do that sad eye thing Dinky could do.

Princess Luna stared at Ditzy then closed her eyes and shook her head hard. At first Ditzy thought she was saying 'no' but then Princess Luna said, "Fine, just for today. But no more calling me by my name. Only call me Morning Dew while I'm in disguise. And stop it with that eye thing. It's really creepy."

Ditzy stopped using her 'sad eyes' and again trotted with joy. She was a sidekick! She was going to show Super Luna that she could be the best sidekick ever.

"I'm going to drop my privacy spell now. Remember, don't use the 'L' word."

Ditzy nodded. "You got it, Miss Morning Dew."

Ditzy's ears popped again as the background noise became clear.

"-that you know how this will work, I need the forth group to come with me," an official looking pony was saying. "The rest of you will remain here until your group is called."

A group of ten ponies followed the official looking pony through a set of double doors. Princess Luna had her mouth hanging open again. She must have been telling her sister the good news.

"What did she just say?" Princess Luna said, turning to Ditzy.

"She said, 'I need the forth group to come with me. The rest of you will remain here until your group is called.'"

"No, before that!"

"She said, 'Attention all newcomers. We have divided you into groups of ten. You can see which group you belong to by checking the chart next to the door. Testing takes about an hour per group. Please remain in the waiting area before and after you are tested. We may call you back for a second trial. Now that you know how this will work' and then she said the other part I already told you."

Luna stared at Ditzy in shock. "I thought I had a privacy spell up. You heard all that? Did everypony else hear us talking?"

"Oh, no. I just remember that from the last three times she said it today. I'm good at remembering. So, am I a good sidekick?"

"Yes. The best sidekick ever. Now I should go check what group I'm in."

Ditzy was so excited. She was the best sidekick ever! The Princess had said it; that made it official. She would have to keep an eye on Super Luna. And keep another eye out for trouble. But that left no eyes for watching where she was going. Ditzy frowned. Being a sidekick was going to be tough work.

# Chapter Five

## When The Plot Begins Thicken, Reduce Heat And Continue To Stir

Luna had been scared for a moment, but the chart indicated she hadn't missed her group. She was in group seven, the last group. Missing her spot in the preliminaries would have meant failing. She couldn't leave yet. She had to figure out what this inability to bake was. Ditzzy, her new sidekick, had already finished her test earlier this morning. Luna didn't know what to think about having a sidekick. It definitely couldn't be something permanent. Still, it seemed to make the pegasus happy.

Luna could sense the presence of the bad baking magic now that she was surrounded by so many ponies with the inability. The source of it was still doing its best to elude her, though. The bad luck magic was like an aura that seemed to be covering everypony. It felt, Luna really wished she could think of a different word to describe it, sticky. It reminded her of walking through sludge. Something she knew all too well what it felt like thanks to one of her adventures a few months ago. It didn't feel unclean, just... sticky.

Each pony had a slightly different aura surrounding them. Most auras seemed to be small. A few were quite large. All the auras had something in common, though; they stuck to one another. Pieces of one aura would get torn off and mixed into with another ponies. Some pieces just hovered in place until another pony got close enough for their aura to stick to it and draw it in.

Luna couldn't sense her own aura and that worried her. She was beginning to think that she didn't have this inability after all. Perhaps she was just somehow able to grab onto a use these stray pieces of aura floating around? Or worse, maybe she was grabbing onto and using another pony's aura. Was she some sort of bad baking parasite? She had to find out. If she was, she'd drop out. She wouldn't dare compete if it meant she was stealing from another pony.

Luna turned towards her sideki- No! Ditzzy. She wouldn't start thinking of her as a sidekick. This was just a game they were playing. Ditzzy's aura wasn't sticky. If anything, it was slippery. Other auras brushed against Ditzzy's and just slid off without taking anything from it. However, Ditzzy's aura also didn't pick up any stray pieces floating around. Whatever Ditzzy's aura was, it was all hers.

With an effort, Luna was able to close off her senses to the bad luck magic and its stickiness. She needed someone knowledgeable to talk to. There had been studies done into this 'bad baking phenomenon' before, but they had all ended in failure. The only ones that might have known anything were the bad bakers themselves, and most of their statements had just boiled down to, 'It's really weird, this bad luck only happens when I bake'. Luna had never found any mentions of ponies sensing an aura before. It seems that being an alicorn was a requirement for that. Or maybe a unicorn gifted at magic. Luna suddenly wished she had spent more time trying to be friendly with her sister's most faithful student.

"Well aren't you looking depressed."

Luna pulled her attention back to the world around her and looked at the unicorn in a red dress standing in front of her. The unicorn was smiling. She still had the fiery determination of youth in her eyes despite her body starting to show it's age.

"I'm... just deep in thought," Luna said.

"She does that a lot," Ditzzy said, nodding. "Sometimes she thinks with her mouth open!"

The unicorn chuckled. "Well, try not to go so deep in thought that you get stuck. My name is Madam Soufflé. But that's too stuffy, so you can just call me Sweet."

"I'm Morning Dew," Luna said. Sweet Soufflé? That name sounded familiar.

"Ditzzy!" Ditzzy said.

“Nice to meet the both of you,” Sweet said. “You’re both first-timers I take it?”

Both Luna and Ditzzy nodded.

“How would you like some advice from an old-timer that talks too much?”

Luna and Ditzzy nodded again much more enthusiastically.

“Wonderful. It’s so nice meeting ponies that respect their elders.”

Sweet looked Luna up and down. “Hmm, how odd. You didn’t sneak in by chance, did you?”

Luna gaped. “Wha- no. No, of course not.”

“Then that is strange. You have no aura of your own. Your friend’s right. You do think with your mouth open a lot.”

Luna shut her mouth.

“No aura means you’re a normal pony that bakes normally. But if you really are able to bake bad... Ah... I see. My advice for you is to stop worrying. I think this competition will be good for you. Just be happy and stop trying so hard.”

Luna started to say something but Sweet held up a hoof. “Save all questions until the end please. I still have to take a look at your friend.”

Sweet stared at Ditzzy. “Well now,” she said. “You certainly are untalented!”

“Thanks,” Ditzzy said, but then a worried look came over her face.

“I mean that as a compliment.”

Ditzzy went back to smiling.

"Your aura is amazing," Sweet said. "It's been a long time since I've seen one so pure. Do you know about boosting? Your confused look says 'no'. My advice for you is to stay exactly as you are. You are already operating at maximum capacity. If you were to try boosting... well, I'm not exactly sure what would happen and I hope I never find out."

Sweet turned back to Luna. "Now you may ask your questions."

"You can sense auras too?"

"Of course. It is my special talent, after all."

"This is great! If we work together, we could figure everything out."

"Where the aura comes from, why it affects only baking, how some ponies can manipulate it?"

"Yes!"

"I already know the answers."

Luna's heart quickened. This was it. The answers she had been searching for.

"And it's a secret."

Luna's heart sank. This wasn't fair. All the answers were right in front of her and this unicorn wasn't talking. Luna wasn't sure why, but Sweet must have had her reasons not to tell.

"I know my answer must be frustrating for you, but I have faith that you'll figure it out on your own in time. Just stop trying so hard and, above all else, be happy. Now if you'll excuse-"

"Sweet!" a raspy voice yelled. The ponies turned and saw a cyan pegasus with a rainbow mane fly across the room and land in front of Sweet.

"Sweet," Rainbow Dash repeated. "I've been looking all over for you."

“Well, hello to you too, Rainbow,” Sweet said with a smile.

“What? Oh! Hi. Anyways, I wanted to ask. Are they going to be using the nulstone again this year?”

Nulstone? Luna had never heard of such a thing. Sweet sighed. “Of course they are. Those idiots won’t listen to my warnings not to use it. They keep voting me down.”

“Why shouldn’t we use it? It always makes the finish amazing!”

“Yes, but it’s too unpredictable. This competition is supposed to be about a pony’s own inability to bake. We shouldn’t have to use outside forces just because they’re flashy.”

“Aren’t you the one that’s always telling me how I should focus less on the winning and more on putting on a show that the crowd will remember?”

“Yes, but at what cost, Rainbow? Mark my words. One of these days that nulstone will cause nothing but trouble and I’ll truly be sorry when I have to say, ‘I told you so’. Now, I really do need to get to the chair-holder’s meeting and make sure they haven’t done anything too stupid before I got there.”

The three ponies watched Sweet leave. Luna was feeling a bit nervous. The nulstone sounded ominous but she was more worried about being so close to Rainbow Dash, bearer of the Element of Loyalty, one of the six Elements of Harmony. It was thanks to her and her friends that Luna had been freed and reunited with her sister. What could Luna say to her? How could she thank her enough? Why hadn’t she thanked her yet? Luna wanted to say something, yet couldn’t. The longer she waited, the harder it would be.

“Hello, Miss Dash!” Ditzzy said. Luna snapped out of her thoughts for what she felt must have been the hundredth time today. She hoped she didn’t have her mouth open this time.

Rainbow Dash turned and seemed to notice the two ponies that had been with Sweet for the first time. “Oh,” she said. “Hello. Hey! I know you.



You're the mailmare of Ponyville, uh... starts with a 'D'... um. Dizzy? Dotty? Derpy? Am I even getting close?"

"Ditzy!" Ditzzy said happily.

"Right, Ditzzy! Knew I'd get it eventually. Thanks for always delivering my mail on time."

Ditzy beamed happily. Rainbow Dash looked at Luna. This was it. Luna was going to have to speak to Rainbow Dash. She would use this to get over her fear of talking to the Elements. She would reveal herself to Rainbow Dash, thank her from the bottom of her heart and invite her and the other Elements to Canterlot. There they would converse and grow closer. Then Luna would feel as if she had some real friends outside of her sister. Well, more friends. Ditzzy was kind of a friend in a weird super hero and sidekick way- No! Stop thinking like that or you'll start to believe it. Ditzzy could be a normal friend and come to Canterlot too.

"I don't think we've met," Rainbow Dash said. "Name's Rainbow Dash."

"I'm Morning Dew," Luna lied.

"Nice to meet you Morning Dew. Good luck in the preliminaries. I'm going to see who else is competing this year. See ya!"

Rainbow Dash started walking away. Nice going, Luna. The first time in nearly a year you come face to face with one of the Elements of Harmony and what to you do? You give her a fake name. Luna sighed. These things always went better in her head.

"Now there's a familiar face," Rainbow Dash said. A unicorn stallion, dark blue mane on a slightly less dark coat, was approaching.

"Rainbow Dash," the unicorn greeted with a smile. "I hope you've been practicing. I think you'll find me much stiffer competition this year."

"You know it, RB! It's going to be you and me again in the finals for sure. I can't wait to show you-" Something suddenly caught Rainbow Dash's attention. "You!" she yelled.

Luna, along with every other pony in the room the wasn't deaf, which was all of them, turned to look at Rainbow Dash. The pegasus was staring angrily at the unicorn with the star hat and cape Luna had nearly killed- that is to say, met earlier.

"Well, well, well," Trixie said. "If it isn't Rainbow Dash. Such a small world, isn't it?"

"Small world nothing. You're stalking me!"

"You have such an ego. Trixie is far too busy to have time to 'stalk' anypony."

"Then why else would you be here?"

"Isn't it obvious? The same reason you and all the other ponies are here. I wish to compete."

"You just want to show me up again! I mean- today. Yeah. You just want to show me up today!"

"Oh my! Is that fear I detect in your voice? Surely the mighty Rainbow Dash, two time champion of the WBE's, isn't afraid of little ole Trixie."

"What? N-no, of course not! I'm not afraid of anypony."

"Well then you shouldn't have any objections to me entering, should you?"

"Wha- I... argh, fine! Just stay out of my way and try not to annoy me!"

Rainbow Dash flapped her wings and flew to the other end of the room. The rest of the ponies went back to waiting for their turn to come or relaxing.

"Wow," Luna said. "Those two must have a history."

“Trixie came to Ponyville a while ago and put on a magic show,” Ditzy said. “Some ponies didn’t like it because they thought Trixie was showing off. I thought it was fun. I liked the spinning fireworks.”

“And I take it Rainbow Dash was one of the ponies that didn’t like the show?”

“Yep! She went up on stage and did some neat flying tricks to show off. Then Trixie wrapped Miss Dash up in a rainbow and made her spin until she was dizzy. It wasn’t as good as the spinning fireworks, but I still liked it.”

“She tried to stop Trixie from showing off by showing off herself? I can see why the two get on each others nerves then. They’re very much alike.”

The lights went out. A pony screamed. Luna rolled her eyes. Why was it that whenever there was a large group of ponies and the lights went out, one pony had to scream. A second pony screamed. OK, sometimes it was two ponies that screamed. A third and forth pony screamed. Somepony laughed. An annoying laugh that sounded more like it was coming out of nose then a mouth. Luna instantly hated it.

“Yes! Scream little ponies! Scream knowing that today you shall witness the end of Equestria!”

That was definitely not a normal thing to happen when the lights went out. Luna knew she had to act fast. The first thing she had to do was get the lights back on before everypony started to panic and trample each other in the dark. She reached out with her magic and felt for the lights. The bulbs when intact. Was the wire cut? No. No breaks anywhere along it. A blown or missing fuse then? No, the fuse was there and fine. What had caused the lights to go out. It couldn’t just have been... No, that would be stupid. Luna used her magic to flip the light switch. The room illuminated. Luna sighed and looked for the source of the laugh.

There was a unicorn standing near the double doors. He had an inky black mane and a dark blue coat. Several ponies were being levitated helplessly in the air around him. He seemed momentarily confused that somepony had already figured out how to undo his darkness. That was all

Luna needed to close most of the distance. The unicorn at last took notice of her.

The unicorn wearing a black mask had scowled at Luna, used his magic to pull his cape across his face, shouted 'Curses!' and then galloped through the doors. Luna couldn't believe that had just happened. Had he learned to be evil from reading a book of villain cliches? Magic surrounded the double doors. Luna dove through them as they slammed shut behind her. She could hear somepony pounding of the other side and muffled yelling.

Luna moved as fast as she could and was gaining on the unicorn. It was then that the ceiling slammed down in front of her. Luna crashed into the new wall and then woozily got back to her feet.

"Ow, what just happened?" Luna asked herself.

"It looks like he pushed a secret button to drop a false wall from the ceiling."

Luna cried out in surprise and spun to see where the answer had come from. She was greeted by a gray pegasus.

"Ditzy?"

"Sidekick Ditzzy reporting for duty!" Ditzzy said with a salute.

"I'm glad you're here. Help me find a way through this wall."

Ditzy tapped her chin with her hoof. A look of deep concentration was on her face. She moved her hoof across the false wall, looking it up and down. She took a few steps back and looked at the real wall. Then her face lit up. "I got it!" she announced as she walked to the wall on her right.

"In my opinion, the best place to put a counterweight release mechanism is... here!" Ditzzy said as she jammed her hoof at the wall.

The floor opened up into a trap door. Luna took to the air but Ditzzy yelped in surprise and fell. Luna stared at the falling pegasus in disbelief for

a second before diving after her. The trap door slammed shut as Luna passed through it, plunging her into darkness.

# Chapter Six

## We Haven't Got A Clue

“Hey! Open up!”

Rainbow Dash pounded on the double doors that led out of the waiting room. Morning Dew and Ditzzy had passed through the doors moments before, chasing after some unicorn that had foalnapped a bunch of ponies. Now the stupid thing was locked tight. What the hay was going on? Why had somepony shouted something about the end of Equestria? Rainbow Dash looked around the room. Some of the ponies looked quite frightened and began asking questions.

“What’s going on?”

“Are we trapped?”

“Was that a foalnapper?”

“Looks that way,” Rainbow Dash said. “But don’t worry. Morning Dew and Ditzzy got out before the doors shut. I’m sure they’ll go for help. And we still have a bunch of us being tested out there. Once they get back and find the doors locked, they’ll know somethings up. It’s only a matter of time before we get out of here and get to put the hurt on whoever locked us in here! For now we’ll have to wait so we might as well get comfortable.”

The ponies turned away and went back to what they had been doing before the lights had gone out. The once loud chatter had quieted down to a few nervous conversations. Rainbow Dash paced back and forth in front of the doors. She was the champion. Everypony would be looking to her for guidance. She looked around the room. Several sets of eyes were on her. Rainbow Dash knew she should say more. Help put their fears to rest. Get some ponies working on an escape plan, maybe. Anything to help takes their minds off the situation they were now in. Rainbow Dash opened her mouth to speak. Suddenly, a section of the wall rotated in a circle and the five ponies standing near it were gone.

“Everypony away from the walls!” Rainbow Dash yelled.

The ponies rushed to the center of the room and shot nervous glances at the walls.

“What is the floors are booby-trapped too?” somepony said. The pegasi took to the air.

“What if the ceiling is trapped?” The pegasi landed again.

“Everypony stop!”

Every pony did stop and turned towards the new voice of command. Trixie stepped forward. “Panicking will get us nowhere. We need to remain calm and stick together. There’s been a foalnapping. We don’t know who did it or why but-”

“I’ll tell you why!” Rainbow Dash said, getting attention back on her. “They felt there was too much competition this year and that they had to thin out the numbers! Whoever did this is another contestant! And they are still in this room!”

The crowd gasped and began whispering to one another. Trixie sighed and shook her head. “Really, Rainbow Dash? They’re still in this room? And just what clever observation leads you to believe this?”

“Simple. How would the foalnapper had know there were ponies against that wall unless they were still in here?”

The crowd began nodding and commenting in agreement. Rainbow Dash grinned. It was time to let her detective skills shine.

“The foalnapper made a mistake, though!” Rainbow Dash announced once the crowd had quieted. They were hanging on her every word. “With this many ponies in the room, some of us must have seen the foalnapper in action! We just need to combine our memories to recreate the scene of the crime and, whammo, foalnapper is caught.”

“This... is the most ill-conceived plan I have ever heard,” Trixie said.

“You’re just jealous you didn’t think of it first! Now then, did anypony notice anything suspicious just before the lights went out or just after they came back on?”

“I did,” a pegasus said. When everyone was looking at him, he continued, “Right after the lights came back on, I saw a unicorn standing in the doorway. He was wearing a black mask and cape. I think his mane might have also been black but that might have just been part of the mask. His coat was definitely blue, though.”

Rainbow Dash tapped her chin. “Interesting. So it seems our foalnapper is a blue unicorn with a dark mane.”

“And it seems you were wrong about him still being in this room,” Trixie said.

“What?”

“If the foalnapper was standing in the doorway, then he must have left when those two other ponies went after him.”

“Well... what... what if he snuck back in through a trap door? You all saw the rotating wall. How many other ways are there into this room?”

“I still think you’re using an incredibly big assumption tha-”

“There he is!” somepony yelled. “Get him!”

What followed was a scuffling of ponies that ended with a unicorn stallion being held down by many hooves.

“Unhoof me!” the unicorn said. “I’m not the foalnapper!”

“Well, well, well,” Rainbow Dash said as she walked toward the unicorn, her eyes narrowing. “If it isn’t my old nemesis, Royal Blue!”

“Nemesis?” Royal Blue said. “What in Equestria are you talking about?”



“Admit it, RB! You foalnapped those ponies in an attempt to get me out of the finals this year so you would have a shot at the trophy.”

“What? Listen to yourself, Rainbow Dash. How would me foalnapping random ponies prevent you from competing?”

“Well.. ah... Don’t ask me! I don’t know how the criminal mastermind works!”

“That’s quite obvious,” Trixie said. “Let him up. Rainbow Dash is wrong, again.”

Rainbow Dash growled but Trixie didn’t give her a chance to speak. “If you really want to go down this path, then you need to do it right. A blue unicorn is not an accurate enough description to accuse anypony. A quick glance around the room and I see five other unicorns that are also shades of blue. Even I am a blue unicorn and-”

“She’s a blue unicorn! Get her!”

Trixie yelped as a pile of ponies landed on her. “I know you were the one that said that, Rainbow Dash!” Trixie yelled.

Rainbow Dash laughed as the ponies let Trixie go. “OK, OK. So we need more information. Sorry about that, RB. No hard feelings?”

Royal Blue harrumphed. “Just don’t make a habit of it,” he said.

“So, did anypony else see something?” Rainbow Dash said to the crowd.

“I saw something,” a voice said. The group turned and looked at an orange earth pony with a long red mane. She was doing her best to turn invisible now that the room’s attention was on her. “I saw... that is to say I think I saw... I saw his cutie mark. It was a bunny.”

“Aha! So it was you, Royal Blue!”

Royal Blue's mouth was hanging open. He tried to start speaking several times before he just lowered his head and sighed. He turned so that his flank was showing towards Rainbow Dash.

"Rainbow Dash, my cutie mark is of a jar of ink and a bundle of quills. It is not, in any sense of the word, a bunny. Now stop it with this ridiculous game of yours."

Rainbow Dash squinted her eyes. "It kind of looks like a bunny."

"It does not!"

"No seriously, everypony come over here and look," Rainbow Dash said, waving everypony over.

The group came near Rainbow Dash and stared at Royal Blue, who was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with so many ponies staring at his flank.

"OK," Rainbow Dash said. "Everypony tilt your head a little to the right and look at the quills. Squint if it helps."

The crowd obeyed. Many ponies had looks of confusion on their faces but, one by one, a look of recognition came over them.

"Oh, wow! It does look like a bunny from this angle!"

"That's so cool!"

"I wish my cutie mark could change shape like that!"

Royal Blue stared in disbelief. He didn't like what he was hearing. This had to be some kind of prank. He turned so the ponies could no longer stare at his 'obviously not a bunny' cutie mark.

"It does not look like a bunny," Royal Blue said again.

"It totally does!" Rainbow Dash said as she flew up to Royal Blue and placed her hooves on his head. "Here, just turn your head like so... now squint and focus on the quills"

Royal Blue rolled his eyes but obeyed. He stared for a minute but his cutie mark didn't magically change shape. "I don't see anything. My cutie mark does no- Oh my word, it does look like a bunny. I'm never going to be able to unsee that."

"A cutie mark that looks like a bunny when you turn your head, doesn't make it a cutie mark of a bunny," Trixie said. "We need more information."

"You're right," Rainbow Dash said. She turned back to the earth pony that had spoken before. The earth pony was looking relieved that she was no longer the center of attention, then she noticed Rainbow Dash staring at her and resumed her attempt at invisibility.

"You got a good look at his cutie mark," Rainbow Dash said. "What color was his coat and tail?"

The earth pony looked around frantically. "I... I couldn't tell," she said.

"What? How could you have seen his cutie mark but not be able to tell what color his coat and tail was?"

"Well... I-I'm..." The pony lowered her head as tears began to flow. "I'm color blind..."

Rainbow Dash's mouth hung open. The ponies near the crying mare were giving comforting words while other ponies in the room were shooting angry glances at the cyan pegasus.

"Nice going, Rainbow Insensitive," Trixie said.

"How was I supposed to know she was color blind!"

"You have been making a mockery of this investigation from the start. I think it's time you stepped aside and let Trixie show you how it's done. What we need to do is create a list of everything everypony saw. We then take any similarities between stories and use that as our basis for what the foalnapper looks like. We'll need this information for the authorities once we're rescued."

Rainbow Dash gritted her teeth. Already Trixie was trying to show her up.

# Intermission

## The Intermissioning

Spike chuckled to himself as he walked the corridors of the WBE's stadium. He was wearing his black top hat and cape. Every so often he twirled his fake mustache. He carried with him a toolbox, some lumber and a length of rope. It was amazing how often rope came in handy. Those fake announcers wouldn't know what hit them. Actually, they probably would know what hit them, but not until after it hit them. That was the key.

Spike chuckled again. Pinkie was also coming up with a plan but, knowing her, it would likely be too soft to have any real effect. Not like a good old fashion rope trap. Spike began to talk to himself out loud about his plan. It seemed the appropriate thing to do given the circumstances. Unbeknownst to Spike, a masked unicorn walking the halls thought the same way.

"So," Spike said, twirling his mustache again. "They think they can just waltz right in and take our jobs, huh? I'll show him that-"

"-it was a mistake to mess with me," the masked unicorn said with a snarl. "Such foalish mares. Thinking they could stop me? The great-"

"-Spike and Pinkie Pie, they'll shout. We'll be so popular, they'll be asking us to announce events all over Equestria. I'll bet-"

"-they'll be shaking in their little horse shoes once my plan is complete. Then all of Equestria

will bow before me. Yes. Bow and-  
”

“-be giving me gemstone after  
gemstone. Oh. And Pinkie will get  
cupcakes, of course. Ah, I can’t wait  
to hear-”

“-them begging for mercy. Once  
they royal sisters are out of the  
way, the rest of Equestria will be  
easy. It’s only a matter of time  
before-”

“-my plan is put into action. I’ll show  
Pinkie the proper way to do this. It  
won’t be long before-”

“-all of Equestria will know my name!”

Spike and the masked unicorn stopped talking to themselves and  
blinked. They looked at each other and said nothing for a while.

“So... uh...” Spike ventured.

“Yeah...” the masked unicorn agreed.

“I like your mask?”

“Oh... thanks. I like your... mustache?”

“Thanks, it’s a number twenty-five.”

Spike scratched the back of his neck in embarrassment while the  
unicorn scrapped his hoof on the floor and looked around the room.

“So... what are you doing back here?” Spike asked.

“Me? Well... I... I can tell you want I’m not doing. I’m not setting traps  
to capture ponies.”

“Oh! Me neither. I am definitely not setting up a trap. Because that would be wrong... trapping ponies.”

“Yes.”

The unicorn scratched the back of his neck in embarrassment while Spike scrapped his foot on the floor and looked around the room.

“Well...” the unicorn said. “I should probably get going.”

“Uh, yeah! Me too.”

“I have a lot of traps to not set up.”

“Yeah. I have a big trap I really need to make sure doesn’t get set up.”

The two grinned sheepishly at each other and walked away. They didn’t speak again until they were out of earshot.

“What a weirdo,” the unicorn said.

Spike said, “What a weirdo.”

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Spike approached the dressing room doors and stopped. Pinkie Pie was there pushing a large wooden crate that had clumps of dirt falling off of it. Her front hooves were placed on the box and her back hooves slowly moved forward. She grunted wordlessly as she strained with all her might to move the box a few inches. She then stopped and panted, sweat pouring from her face. She looked at Spike and her face instantly brighten up.

“Hi, Spike!” Pinkie said with a raised hoof, then went back to grunting as she struggled to move the box.

“Pinkie? What is all this?”

Pinkie dropped down to four hooves and smiled, her earlier exhaustion forgotten. “This is my Emergency Party Kit number one-four-three.”

“You have one hundred and forty-three party kits?”

“Oh, Spike... don’t be silly. I have four hundred and seventy-eight Emergency Party Kits buried all over Equestria. For emergencies!”

Pinkie pulled out a crowbar and stuck it in the crate. With a twist of her mouth, the wooden sides of the crate fell away and clattered loudly on the floor. Regal’s door opened. The brown earth pony stuck his head out, looked nervously at the two of them, then shut his door.

Pinkie dug happily through her party supplies then gasped. “Oh no! This EPK is missed its piñata! I have to rectify this!”

Pinkie stood in a dramatic pose then began bouncing away, humming to herself. Spike sighed and began assembling his trap.



# Chapter Seven

## You Have Fallen Into My Trap: The Musical

Luna wasn't lost. The stadium, while big, was not an endless maze of corridors. There was no basement. There were no trap doors, or sliding wall, or torches that opened secret doors when they were twisted. The hallways were clearly labeled so that the attendees would be able to easily get in, find their seats and enjoy the show.

Luna wasn't lost. The walls had some time ago changed to blackened bricks. Every few feet was a torch burning on the wall, providing pour illumination for the hallway that twisted and turned in random directions. The maze of corridors had been left behind once Luna had gotten out her marker and started marking the paths they has already gone down. Every so often, Luna and Ditzzy would pass by a door with an iron bar window. The room on the other side of the door looked like a prison cell.

No, Luna wasn't lost. Lost didn't even begin to describe where she was.

Luna stopped walking and sighed. They had already gone on for what seemed like miles. Wherever they were, it wasn't the stadium anymore. Luna wasn't even sure if they were still in Ponyville.

"I'm sorry," Ditzzy said for the hundredth time.

"It's not your fault."

"But it is! If I didn't push the button, then we wouldn't have fallen. Now we're lost and we don't know how to get out and I'm scared I'll never see my Dinky again!"

"Your what?"

"Dinky! My daughter! She's the whole reason I'm in this contest. She'll be so scared if I don't come back. Then she'll start to cry and then I'll cry because I made her cry and then-"

“Whoa! Calm down, calm down. I’ll get us out of here. I’m just taking it slow and trying to find the normal way out. I don’t want to start breaking down walls if I don’t have to. Besides, if worse comes to worse I could always contact my sister for help.”

“Like when you open and close your mouth while thinking?”

“I don’t- do I actually do that? Anyways, I can connect my magic with Equestria and find my sister that way. Although, I’d rather not have to do that.”

“Why not?”

“Well...” Luna said, feeling uncomfortable. “I’ve kind of been so caught up in my research that I’ve been ignoring her lately and on top of that I’ve been sneaking around behind her back and keeping secrets from her.”

“Oh,” Ditzzy said. Such a simple response yet it made Luna feel even more guilty.

Luna started walking again and Ditzzy followed. “Anyways, don’t worry about me,” Luna said. “You need to chin up. You couldn’t have know there was a trap door there. There shouldn’t have been a trap door there. This stadium is portable. They just set it on any flat ground. No digging required. There shouldn’t even be a lower level.”

“Maybe the hallway was slanted and we went up when we chased the unicorn?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. It seems unlikely. I’m willing to believe anything at this point just to get out of here.”

The wall in front of the pair slid open. A pink pony carrying a piñata bounced out and the wall slid back down. The pink pony set down the piñata and looked at them. She raised a foreleg into the air. “Hi, Princess Luna,” she said as she waved.

“Pinkie Pie? How does everypony keep recognizing me? You know what? I don’t care. Do you know how to get back to the stadium?”

Pinkie giggled. “We’re still in the stadium! So you get back to it by not going anywhere. Bye, Princess Luna!”

Pinkie twisted a torch and the wall in front of her slid open. She bit onto the piñata’s string and hopped through.

“Wait!” Luna called out as the wall slammed shut but Pinkie Pie was already gone.

“Maybe we should try and follow her?” Ditzzy asked. She walked up the the torch on the wall, reached for it but then stopped and drew back.

“Really, Ditzzy. It wasn’t your fault. You touching another switch isn’t going to cause anything bad to happened.”

Ditzzy came back towards Luna. “I don’t know,” she said. “Could you do this one?”

Luna smiled. “Of course.” Luna grabbed onto the torch with her magic and twisted it. A metal cage fell from the ceiling and landed on the pair. They were knocked off their hooves as a bottom to the cage slid into place. A voice laughed in the distance. That annoying laugh.

“It seems you foals have fallen into my trap.”

The masked unicorn walked out of the darkness from down the hall and strolled towards the captured ponies. He wore a wicked sneer on his muzzle as he laughed again.

Luna got up. She wasn’t going to be fooled again. Little did this unicorn know he was dealing with an alicorn. Luna would just calmly bend these metal bars and then have a nice chat about why it was wrong to foalnap ponies. Except that Luna had no idea where the ponies were being held, or how to even get out of wherever here was. She didn’t think she could physically force the information from a pony, even one such as this. She would have to wait. Strike when the time was right.

Luna whispered to Ditzzy, "Follow my lead." Ditzzy nodded.

As the unicorn approached, Luna raised her hoof across her forehead. "Oh my! We've been captured. Whatever shall we do?"

"And I'm the Mare of Mystery, D- wait, I think I followed the wrong lead."

Luna and the unicorn stared at Ditzzy. Luna sighed.

"You are a strange one," the unicorn said. "No matter. Two more ponies will be perfect for my plans. And neither of you is a unicorn. How lucky."

The unicorn levitated the cage and started walking down the hallway. Luna caught a glimpse of his cutie mark. It looked like a bunny. Had Luna been captured by a villain with a bunny cutie mark? That couldn't be right. She must have seen it from a bad angle. The unicorn walked to the next torch and twisted it. The wall opened to a new passageway that he started to go down.

Luna couldn't remain silent anymore. "This has been bothering me for too long and I need to know. Where are we?"

The unicorn laughed. Luna hated that laugh with every fiber of her being. "We are in the ancient catacombs, deep beneath the stadium-"

"Ancient catacombs? This stadium was assembled a week ago!"

"... assembled atop the ruins of-"

"What ruins? I've read the geological reports of Ponyville. There are no ruins here."

"... within the parallel secondary dimension-"

"Just admit you have no idea where we are!"

"It matters not where we are. All that matters is that it suits my purposes perfectly."

“And your purposes would be...?”

“Becoming the ruler of Equestria!”

“Wow... big plan. So you must have a way to deal with the Princesses?” This could be important information. It was doubtful this unicorn had anything that could actually threaten Luna or her sister, but it was best to play on the safe side.

“The Princesses will be no threat to me once my plan is completed.”

“Your plan to rule Equestria?”

“The same.”

Luna’s head began to hurt. Something told her this unicorn was not playing with a full deck of cards. Or even half a deck. Probably safe to assume they weren’t even cards.

They had come to a dead end. The unicorn twisted another torch and the wall slid open into a large room. The room was filled with cages much like the one Luna and Ditzy were in. Each cage contained two or three ponies. All earth ponies or pegasi. So this evil mastermind was afraid of magic messing up his plans. Interesting. Luna would be sure to show him all the magic he wanted. Just as soon as she found out if he really did have anything dangerous. Even an idiot could be a threat with the right magical focus.

Luna’s cage came to a stop at the far left end of the row of cages and was lowered to the ground. The unicorn walked in front of them all and turned around.

“Welcome, my little ponies. I would like to thank you all for being here today. It is because of all of you that I shall get the power needed to rule Equestria. That is, once I take it from you. I know you all must be wondering what I mean. You aren’t unicorns. You have no magic for me to take. But you’re wrong. I will steal from you the power you do possess. The power of bad baking!”

The unicorn laughed his annoying laugh again. Luna was trying to resist hitting her face with her hoof and failing. "That's your plan?" she asked.

The unicorn stopped laughing and looked nervous. He clearly wasn't expecting anypony to actually question the absolute genius that was his plan.

"Y-yes. That is my plan. I will steal your bad baking ability and make myself, The Worst Baker in Equestria!"

"And?"

"And? And what? That's my plan."

"You're going to take over Equestria... by baking bad..."

"Yes. Clearly you don't understand just how bad a baker can be. I can make something so stinky that any pony that smelled it would pass out! Or... or I could make a cookie so spicy that any pony that ate it would shoot fire out of their mouth!"

"And how will that help you rule Equestria?"

"Those are just little examples of my new found powers. There are a million ways I could use bad baking to seize control of Equestria."

"Name one."

The unicorn was becoming furious. Luna was feeling a little bad but after the ordeal he had put her through, revenge was sweet.

"My evil plans are not for you to question! You will bow before me! You will all bow before me! Soon, all of Equestria will bow down before the might of, Snuggle Cakes!"

Luna nearly choked with laughter. The other trapped ponies began to giggle too.

“Your...” Luna was having a hard time breathing. “Your name is Snuggle Cakes?”

“Yes! What, why? Is there something wrong with my name?”

“No... no-nothing... it’s just that...” Luna was getting her laughter under control. “Honestly, I was expecting something more sinister. Something like Dark Arts, or Blackest Runes, or, I don’t know, something that doesn’t sound like a pet name between two love-struck ponies?”

“My mother named me Snuggle Cakes. I love my mother.”

Now Luna did feel bad. “Your name is fine... it just isn’t the sort of name I’d expect from a villain.”

“... Which... is why this has all been a trick! Yes! A trick. To think the future ruler of Equestria would actually be named Snuggle Cakes. What a foal you are. I am actually the evil magician, Dark Arts!”

Luna had had enough. This was just sorry. It was time to use her powers to bust out of here and bring this wannabe bad guy down. Ditzzy would love this. It was a shame that Luna would have to reveal her disguise. She wouldn’t be able to compete after this, but the ponies of Equestria came first. Luna grabbed onto the metal bars with her magic and got ready to pull. It was then that her body locked up.

“I suppose you all are wondering what this is?” Snuggle Cakes was saying as he walked back and forth, levitating a small black stone. “This is a nulstone. Something developed by the ponies of the WBE’s to make the ending of their competition something spectacular. Normally, when magic is channeled into the stone, it nullifies the bad baking aura, allowing a pony to bake as well as they are able. Once the magic is removed, though, the bad baking aura comes rushing back and, if the pony is skilled, they can draw in the aura and cause something huge to happen.

“However, that’s not what I’m doing. What I’m doing is pulling magic out. The aura in all of you will amplify and then with a spell I will use the stone to pull all of that energy into me!”

Luna gasped as the waves of magic washed over her. How could such a small stone be producing so much power? She felt like she was drowning in an ocean during a storm. Such unbelievable magic. That stone could remake the very fabric of reality. Or unmake it! She had to do something. Luna struggled to get a hold of her magic. Just one spell. Any spell to interrupt this.

All of Luna's strength was being used just to keep herself standing. She was an alicorn. The second most powerful being in Equestria next to her sister. If she could barely move, then what was happening to the other ponies? The other ponies. Luna had to protect them. It was her duty. Luna slowly turned her head. They must be so scared. It would be a mercy if they had just been overwhelmed and lost consciousness. The other ponies. Luna had to look at them. See their pain. Use it to fuel her anger; her magic. The other ponies... were fine?

The rest of the caged ponies were alright. They looked a bit worried and confused but certainly not like they were struggling against an overwhelming magical force. So the magic was operating at a level that only Luna could sense. Great. She was probably the only one that could do anything and she could barely even move. Worse still. That idiot likely had no idea of the power he was channeling.

Luna tried to alert Ditzy. Let her know that it was all up to her now. The fate of all of Equestria. Luna slowly moved her head. One of Ditzy's eyes swiveled and looked at Luna. Ditzy turned and gasped. Luna only managed a weak smile. She was unable to speak.

Ditzy tapped her chin with her hoof. A look of deep concentration was on her face. She looked around the cage, at the ceiling, at the other ponies, at Snuggle Cakes. Ditzy's face lit up. She walked over to Luna and opened her saddle bag. She pulled out the rope. Luna was glad she had decided to bring rope. It was amazingly useful when needed. Ditzy flipped her neck and sent one end of the rope up through the bars on top. She bit onto the falling rope and pulled it to the front of the cage where she wrapped it around another bar.

Snuggle Cakes was too caught up in his stone to notice anything. Ditzy rummaged through one of Luna's saddle bags and then went to the other. She pulled out Luna's scarf. Ditzy knotted the end of the scarf



together and then tied it to the end of the rope. Luna's beautiful scarf. She never even gotten a chance to wear it. Hopefully it was salvageable after all of this.

Ditzy went back into Luna's bag and pulled out a pair of glasses. She looked down her muzzle in confusion then placed the glasses on Luna's face. Ditzy turned her head to the side and looked at Luna. She then bit onto the glasses and returned them to the bag. She pulled out the map of Ponyville and the medical strips.

Ditzy started folding the map and had soon made a paper glider. Of course! The glider would hit Snuggle Cakes and then once distracted Luna would be free to act. The rope and scarf where going to be used as a launcher to get the glider all the way across the room. Ditzy was a genius!

Luna then noticed Ditzy tugged on her necklace. Ditzy brought Luna's necklace over her head and around her invisible horn. She then attached the necklace to the glider with the medical strips. Luna suddenly realized she had no idea what Ditzy was thinking.

Ditzy adjusted the placement of the scarf holding the glider. She looked out across the room, seeming to do one final calculation. She then bit onto the rope's end and tugged hard. The make shift pulley system sent the scarf forward and then whipped the glider into the air. The glider flew to the left and crashed into the corner of the room.

Luna had a sudden sense of foreboding. Ditzy looked at her and smiled. Ditzy had done whatever it was that she had thought Luna had wanted her to do. Now Equestria was doomed.

"This should be enough of an amplification," Snuggle Cakes said. "Now, to cast the spell and take your powers for my own!"

Luna felt like screaming as the magical pressure increased and then suddenly stopped. Luna looked around. Snuggle Cakes was no longer channeling magic. He had his back turned to them. The stone was on the floor. Now was Luna's chance to... to... Luna couldn't move! Her hoofs seemed to be rooted in place and her ears were ringing. No. That wasn't ringing. That was... music?

Snuggle cakes turned around.

Snuggle Cakes: Look at me. Can't you see?  
I am a very scary wick-ed po-ny.

I have trapped you all in here,  
There's no place to run and hide.

I hope you're feeling comfy,  
'cause we're going for a ride!

I will use this magic stone,  
To find your powers deep in-siiiiide,

And trans-fer them all to me.

Look at me! I'm the one to be!  
Soon I shall be much greater than roy-al-ty.

The princesses will stop me?  
They are nothing more than fleas!

I will take Equestria,  
And bring it to its knees!

The ponies bow before me,  
From all the power that I seeeeeize,

As they wor-ship me dai-ly.

I will become the most horrible tyraaaaant,  
My control of Equestria will be com-plete.

Luna:  
(Hey!) All the ponies will learn to fear meeee  
You're stupid plan actually working would be a feat

You're jo-king. This can't be.  
Are we supposed to take you ser-i-ous-ly?

You'll steal from us our powers,  
Of truly horrid baking?

And somehow from all this,  
The royal rule you'll be taking?

Forgive me if it doesn't seem,  
That my hoovies are a sha-kiiiiing,

But I feel this is sil-ly.

Look at you. Can't you see?  
What you are doing is a ca-la-mi-ty.

You want to rule the world,  
But your plan is not too keen.

You're like a playground bully,  
That's just bad at being mean.

As for being a villain?  
You are the worst I've ever seeeeen,

And I don't say that light-ly.

Ditzy:

I hope you know what you're do-iiiiing.  
He seems like a fruit basket short an orange.

I want again to see my Dink-yyyy,  
And not to have him... uh... Oh shoot!

Pinkie Pie:

Look at me! Can't you see?  
This will be the absolute great-est par-ty!

The streamers will be hanging,  
The time will soon be near!

Spike:

Pinkie! Quiet down!  
We don't want them to hear!

Pinkie Pie: All will be forgiven,  
I hope so most sin-ceeeere!

They will be-come friends with me!

Spike: That's your plan? A par-ty?  
You really need to think much big-ger Pink-ie.

The only way to stop them,  
Is to use a mighty trap!

They will step upon this X,  
And the rope? It will go snap!

Pinkie Pie: This seems a bit extreme,  
For both these ponies to foal-naaaap!

Spike: It's the on-ly way. You'll see.

Pinkie Pie: I think they just need a little kindneeeess.  
Spike: Can you be quiet? I'm working on the timing.

Pinkie Pie: We really should be friendlier to theeeem!  
Spike: Urgh. I can't work with all your stupid...  
rhyming?

Trixie: It's so true! Ob-vious-ly.  
I most truly am the ve-ry best po-ny!

The crowd will all adore me,  
There is nopony greater!

Rainbow Dash: You are so annoying!  
I can't wait to beat you later.

Trixie: I'll be a celebrity,  
To my whims they all will ca-teeeer.

When I solve this mys-ter-y

Rainbow Dash(mockingly): Look at me! Can't you see?  
For I am the Stupid and Low-ly Trix-ie!

Rainbow Dash(normal): A more annoying pony,  
I could never have foreseen.

Trixie: Oh, come on now, Rainbow Dash,  
Don't be such a drama queen.

Rainbow Dash: You have the biggest ego,  
Of any pony there has beeeeen!  
  
And that is in-clu-ding me.

Trixie: I can't believe you came here just to face meeee.  
My reasons for entering this contest are my  
own.

Rainbow Dash: You're just worried that I am so much bet-teeeer.  
I'm trying to resist breaking your jawbone.

Snuggle Cakes: Look at me! Look at me!  
Can't you see? Can't you see?

I cast my spell, set my course.  
This is it! I've no remorse

Luna: I've had more then I can take.  
Your stupid plan I will unmake!

Ditzy: My resolve, I must toughen!  
I will fight on for my Muffin!

Pinkie Pie: It just takes a little heart,  
That's how all great friendships start!

Spike: I think my ears are ringing,  
Can we stop it with this singing?

Trixie: A thousand adoring fans.

Just you wait! It's in my plans!

Rainbow Dash: I guess that you will see  
I'll be the one with the trophy!

Snuggle Cakes: For I am the most wic-ked-

Luna: -Fed up-

Ditzy: -Side kick!-

Pinkie Pie: -Par-ty!-

Spike: -Please stop-

Trixie: -Great-est-

Rainbow Dash: -Awe-some!-

**All but Spike: Poooo-nyyyyyyy!**

The ponies in the cages stamped their hooves in applause. Snuggle Cakes looked around in confusion. Luna had no idea what had just happened. Ditzy was smiling and humming the song again to herself.

"Wow," Snuggle Cakes said. "I have no idea what spell I just cast but that certainly wasn't the right one. I'm sure there was an instruction manual around here somewhere..."

"Super Luna!" Ditzy whispered. "Now's your chance! I'll cover for you!" Ditzy looked to where the necklace had fallen. It suddenly all clicked for Luna.

Luna mentally reached out to her necklace and willed herself towards it, making sure her saddlebags would be left behind. She vanished and reappeared above her necklace. She let her disguise drop. "Snuggle Cakes!" she yelled, using her magic to add volume to her voice.

All eyes were now on Luna. Snuggle Cakes' eyes went wide. "P-p-p-princess Luna!" he managed to say.

The other ponies were whispering amongst themselves.

"It's Princess Luna!"

"Look, the Princess!"

"I thought she'd be taller."

"The Princess is naked!"

Luna's eye twitched. Of course her being seen without her royal ensemble was going to be the front page news tomorrow. Nevermind. She had this moron to deal with first.

"Hey everypony!" Ditzzy yelled. "I just want to let you know that Super Luna already rescued the pony that was next to me and that she's most likely safe so we don't need to go looking for her or wonder where she is until she reappears later." Ditzzy looked at Luna and winked.

Snuggle Cakes laughed. That stupid annoying laugh! "I don't know how word of my plans reached Canterlot but it doesn't matter. I had a contingency plan just for you, Princess Luna."

Luna prepared herself. This would have to be quick. If Snuggle Cakes had realized what the nulstone could do to her... no time to think of that. Time to act! The door at the far side of the room banged open. Everypony turned to look.

An earth pony with a brown coat and dark brown mane was on the other side of the door. "Hey, Snuggle Cakes. I know you had that 'Do Not Disturb' sign on your door but I just wanted you to know there's been this pink pony and dragon... that's... been..."

The earth pony looked around the room, at the cages, at Luna and back at Snuggle Cakes. "This isn't right at all," he said. "Your dressing room is at least ten times as big as mine! And what's with all the ponies in cages. Why is the Princess here? And what is up with this room? My door is five feet down from yours but the wall on this side must go down for twenty. How is your room bigger on the inside than the outside?"

Snuggle Cakes looked around nervously then said, "... within the parallel secondary dimension-"

"That's it!" Luna said. "I have had it with you!"

Snuggle Cakes looked at Luna and then ran towards the exit. Luna was furious. "You are the worst villain ever!" she called out as she gave chase.

Once Luna had reached the door, she heard a snap, a twang and a cry of surprise. Luna slowed down and watched the unicorn dangled from the ceiling and the baby dragon wearing a top hat and cape celebrating beneath him.

"Alright!" Spike said. "It worked! I knew it would!"

Luna walked up to the dragon. "Hello, Spike," she said.

Spike turned around and looked up at Luna, his eyes growing panicked. He quickly took off his hat and stuffed his cape and mustache inside it. He looked left, right, then down at the hat. Spike took a deep breath and blew green fire on the hat. It quickly dissolved into smoke and blew away. "Princess Luna," he said. "Fancy seeing you here. This... uh..." Spike looked up at the unicorn and sighed. "This is exactly what it looks like."

"I should hope so. Good job, Spike."

"Huh? Uh... yeah. I did do a pretty good job, didn't I?"

"I'll say. This one has been slippery but thanks to you, we got him."

"Hi again, Princess Luna!" Luna turned to see Pinkie Pie wrapped in streamers and hanging upside down from the ceiling. "Don't worry about me. I'm not trapped! Well, I am. But not on purpose! Lets just say that spring-loaded streamers-in-a-can need to be opened away from the face."

"So, what should we do with him?" Spike asked, looking up at the unicorn.

"We'll need to send word to my Sister so she can call for the royal guards."

"The royal guards?"



“Oh yes. Foalnapping, dark magic, attempted takeover of Equestria. This is one bad pony.”

“Wow! I knew he was bad but, all of that?”

“So he wasn’t a McRuderson at all!” Pinkie shouted. “He’s worse! He was a Meany Beany Jamboreeny!”

Luna looked at Pinkie Pie and then Spike. Spike shrugged. Luna cleared her throat. “Yes... well, I’m glad you’re here Spike. I’ll need you to send a letter to my sister. And how would you like to take credit for all of this?”

“Really? You want me to take the credit?”

“Oh yes! Write that letter and don’t even mention I was here. This was all thanks to you.”

Spike blushed. “Thanks, Princess Luna! I need to go find some paper and a quill!”

As Spike ran off, Luna looked at Snuggle Cakes. She used her magic to change the rope into chains and levitated the unicorn in front of her. She would have to make sure he didn’t escape until the guards got here. With any luck, her sister would just send the guards and not come herself. Luna sent her magic into the room behind her to break the locks on the cages. She also grabbed the nulstone and moved it towards her with telekinesis. This thing was dangerous. She squeezed and the stone shattered into dust. The WBE’s would just have to come up with some other gimmick for the finals.

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Luna was heading towards the front of the stadium with the freed ponies following behind and Ditzzy trotting happily beside her. Luna spotted a group of panicked ponies outside the waiting area.

“Can I help?” Luna asked as she got close.

The ponies turned around and quickly bowed. "Princess Luna," the official looking pony from before said. "Thank goodness you're here. Somepony sealed the door with magic and we can't get in! All the ponies inside are trapped!"

Luna eyed Snuggle Cakes who was doing his best to look away from her. "Let me get that for you," Luna said as she undid the spell and threw the doors open.

# Chapter Eight

## Let's Wrap This Up In Ten Paragraphs Flat

"We have gone over this, Rainbow Dash. We have checked and rechecked every pony against the list. The foalnapper is not in here!" Trixie said, her face inches away from Rainbow Dash's. The ponies in the room were watching with mild interest.

"If he's not here anymore it's only because he snuck out once he heard you talking about making a checklist!" Rainbow Dash shouted back. All the ponies heads turned to watch Rainbow Dash. It was boring watching these two fight but at least it helped the time go by.

"We did a headcount at the very beginning. There have been no more foalnappings. Everypony that was here is still here. Face it, Rainbow Dash. You were wrong!"

"Gah! You are intentionally trying to get on my nerves today. The foalnapper is still out there!"

"Well unless he just suddenly walks through that door, I guess we're out of luck!"

There was a click as the door opened. On the other side of the door was Princess Luna, but next to her was a masked unicorn.

"There he i-" Rainbow Dash started to say.

"Wait!" Trixie yelled. "How many ponies are you going to tackle today until you listen? We have to use the checklist. Now then. Unicorn? Check. Male? Check. Dark mane possibly black? Dark blue coat? Bunny for a cutie mark? Check, check and check. Black mask and cape? Check. OK, Rainbow Dash. Now you can say it."

"There he is! Get him!"

Snuggle Cakes gulped as dozens of anger ponies raced towards him.

# Chapter Nine

## Above All Else, Be Happy

Luna was feeling nervous. It was finally her groups turn for the preliminary testing and she was next in line. The pony up on stage wasn't doing well. She kept making mistakes. Not the 'Ops, my dough spilled and I'm now stuck to the floor' mistakes but rather the 'I forgot where I put my spoon and spent the past five minutes looking for it before realizing it was still in my mouth' mistakes. The three judges were taking notes. It was still probably better than how Luna would do.

Luna's aura, or rather her lack of one, still worried her. Sweet had said, 'No aura means you're a normal pony that bakes normally.' However, Luna didn't bake normally. At least, not normally. It was confusing. It was like there was a thousand rules that were always changing and everypony else knew them but wouldn't tell her.

At least something had turned out right today. The royal guards had come and arrested the beaten up Snuggle Cakes, the caged ponies had been set free and the preliminaries had resumed. Everything was great except for the whispering that Princess Luna had made an appearance. That news would definitely get to Canterlot soon.

Luna wondered what she was going to tell her sister about Snuggle Cakes and how she had stopped him. What if she said she had learned of a plot against Equestria and acted on her own? No, too irresponsible. She had a vision in a dream and came to check it out? Too unlikely. She had developed a sixth sense where by observing various little niggly feelings in her body she was able to predict the future? No. Her sister would more likely believe that a talking dog had told her. Luna knew she couldn't lie to her sister. Not anymore. She would go along with her plan of confessing tonight. More likely even sooner when she completely blew her test in a few minutes.

'Stop trying so hard and, above all else, be happy,' Sweet had said. Good advice for anypony. Perhaps it was the secret to the auras? Do you just have to not try hard and be happy for it to work? Luna wasn't trying

hard. She didn't even know how one was supposed to try hard at baking bad. Emotions could often be used in magic. Maybe the aura only worked while a pony was happy? That didn't seem likely. Many ponies here didn't exactly seem happy but they still passed the pre-test to get in. Besides, Luna was happy. Wasn't she?

Luna wasn't feeling sad, but happy wasn't really the emotion she felt either. Today had been... frustrating. Yesterday had been a happier day. She had spent yesterday... combing the library for a history book on the WBE's she had read once and then getting frustrated when she learned it had been checked out a week ago. OK, bad example. But the day before that had been... No. Surely earlier this week... Luna didn't like where this train of thought was going. How many days of frustration had she put herself through? How long had it been since she was last truly happy? Sometime before all this competition nonsense started for sure.

"Thank you for waiting, Morning Dew. It's your turn now," one of the judges said to Luna.

Luna began to walk towards the stage and kept thinking about when she was truly happy last. She was usually happy when she was with her sister. Like that time they had gone to the theatre together. That was a truly happy day.

Luna stepped up to the baking station.

Or the time they had a picnic in the forests beneath Canterlot and the ants had carried away their last cupcake. That had also been a truly happy day.

Luna started moving some of the ingredients around the counter top.

Or the time they had visited that candy factory and her sister had insisted that they try the new magical soda with the carbonation that let you float. That had been a very weird day, but it had been a truly happy day too.

Luna poured some flour into the bowl.

There were so many days. So many happy times. Which one was she looking for? Which one would help her now? What was the secret between happiness and the aura? Was there even a secret or was Luna just trying hard to find something that wasn't even there? Stop trying so hard! Every truly happy day she had remembered had one thing in common.

Luna stopped herself in mid-reach for her spoon.

Luna suddenly missed her sister. That feeling of togetherness. Of not having to worry about what someone else thinks. Of just being yourself. Of love. She couldn't wait for tonight. Luna let her magic flow into Equestria. She didn't want to hide anymore. Almost instantly she found her sister's magic. They spoke wordlessly.

I miss you.

I miss you, too.

I'm sorry.

Don't be. I forgive you.

They embraced. It wasn't a physical embrace but it carried the same meaning. Luna smiled. She reluctantly let go of her sister's magic and drew her own magic back towards her. They were going to have a lot to talk about tonight. As Luna began pulling the last of her magic out of Equestria, she sensed it. The bad luck magic, still full of energy from the earlier use of the nulstone. Luna had found its hiding place. She reached for it.

Luna gasped as the waves of magic washed over her. She feared she would be overwhelmed again, but the magic was different this time. She didn't feel like she was drowning, more like riding a giant wave. This was... this was... what was this? Why was it so familiar?

This power. This was where the bad baking aura came from? Did her sister know? How could she not? But how was any non-alicorn able to touch this? Why could only some ponies use it? Why did it only affect baking? What was that judge saying?

“Morning Dew! If you are not going to continue then I suggest you withdraw and exit the stage.”

The test! Luna reigned in the magic to a more controllable level. It was time to give these ponies a show they'll never forget.

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It was cheating. Luna knew this but she didn't care. It was far too much fun. The magic had its limits. It couldn't be forced but it could be directed. She could tell the batter to explode and write a message on the wall, but she couldn't control what was written. That the magic had chosen to write something obscene was a little embarrassing.

Luna added sugar and made the batter flash like a strobe light. The eggs burst as full grown doves flew out and around the room. The batter erupted from the bowl like a water spout. Luna laughed as she tried to push it back in. She felt like a filly playing in a puddle of mud, which, truthfully, was a fairly accurate description of her current actions.

When she felt she had done enough, Luna poured the batter into a baking dish and placed it in the oven. She made sure the magic would cause fungus to grow on it. Hopefully a big mushroom would be in the center. Luna turned and smiled at the judges.

The judges stared at Luna, mouths agape. Luna looked down at herself and realized she was almost completely covered in batter. She shook herself the best she could then returned to smiling.

“Th-thank you, Morning Dew. You may return with the others to the waiting area.”

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“How was it?” Ditzzy asked as Luna came back to the waiting area.

“It was fun,” Luna said.

“I wish my baking was fun instead of mean. I really hope we both get chosen!”

“Yeah, uh... so do I.”

Luna realized that her little stunt likely guaranteed her a spot in the finals. She was worried about that. There were so many ponies here. Some were just in it for the glory but some had had very good reasons to compete. Like Ditzzy and her daughter. If Luna got picked instead of Ditzzy... well, she'd just have to compete and see if she could give the prize away.

The waiting room was filled with the chatter of ponies discussing their test. A few had been asked to come back for a second trial. The atmosphere was that of nervous excitement. Very soon the judges would return and announce the finalists.

Ditzzy was humming the song from earlier. Luna knew she would never be able to get that tune out of her head. It was nice to know she at least had a beautiful singing voice.

The doors opened and the three judges from the test as well as the two from outside stepped through. The noise stopped as all the competitors watched the judges assemble along the wall.

“Attention, competitors!” the judge in the center said loudly. “We would like to thank each and every one of you for your patience during today’s testing and the little... mishap earlier. We have deliberated long and hard and in the end, we have come to a decision on this year’s finalists!

“Fillies and Gentlecolts, be sure to give a big round of applause as I present to you, in no particular order, our finalists!

“Rainbow Dash!”

Rainbow Dash took to the air, did a flip and landed by the judges. “Alright,” she said. “I hope all of you are ready because I won’t be making it easy this year.”

“Royal Blue!”

A unicorn stallion calmly stepped forward and took a spot next to Rainbow Dash. There were a couple quiet giggles in the crowd about



bunnies. Rainbow Dash gave Royal Blue a nervous grin. Royal Blue just turned up his head and looked away.

“Evergreen!”

A green earth pony mare shouted in excitement and stepped forward.

“Trixie!”

Trixie walked forward. Rainbow Dash shot her an angry look that only caused Trixie to smirk.

“Morning Dew!”

Luna walked forward and smiled the best she could.

“Fair Breeze!”

A white pegasus stallion flapped gently through the air and took his place in line.

“Sunny Lights!”

An orange earth pony with a long red mane gasped, looked around nervously then slowly took her place in line.

“Ditzy Doo!”

Luna let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. Ditzy trotted into line, her face beaming proudly.

“These are this year’s finalists. Each of them is an exceptionally bad baker, but, after tonight, only one of them will get to call themselves the Worst Baker in Equestria! Let’s give them all another round of applause!”

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Luna was outside enjoying the fresh air. Some of the ponies not picked had been disappointed but most had been happy when they received free tickets to the runner-up section in the stadium. It had been a

crazy day. Luna still wasn't sure what to do about being in the competition tonight.

"Hello," a friendly voice called.

Luna turned to look at a unicorn mare with a pink mane and a white coat. She was smiling happily and levitating a notepad and pencil.

"Hi," Luna said then watched the pad and pencil float next to her face.

"Can I get your autograph?"

"Oh! Ah... sure." Luna balanced the pad on a hoof and took the pencil in her mouth.

"I'm your biggest fan, Princess Luna!"

Luna bit the pencil in two. She spat out the broken wood and graphite. How did this keep happening to her? She felt her ears pop as a soundproof bubble of magic surrounded her and the unicorn. Luna hadn't cast that spell. She looked at the unicorn. Pink mane, white coat, and a... yep... sun for a cutie mark.

"Tia?" Luna ventured.

"Oh-uh. Looks like you've seen through my disguise," Celestia said with a smirk.

"Disguise? My illusion is a disguise. This is a full body transformation. What are you doing here?"

"Do you honestly think you're the only princess that enjoys sneaking out of the castle?" Celestia said with a mischievous grin.

"But... what about your meetings, and the petitions?"

"The meetings went quick and there was only a few petitions thanks to so many ponies going to the WBE's tonight. I just had to come and cheer you on."

“About that. I’m, well... I’m not sure I’ll be competing.”

“Oh?”

“It seems unfair. I can sort of control the bad baking magic.”

“And you think the others can’t?”

“Huh?”

“Every pony that makes it into the finals has at least some control over the magic, even if it’s done subconsciously. Remember your soup? If you’re really worried about an unfair advantage then just grab onto the magic but don’t tell it to do anything. Let your subconscious direct it.”

“I suppose I could- the magic! I need to tell you about the source and-” Luna sighed. Her sisters face said everything. “You already know. Don’t you?”

“I do.”

“You’ve had to have seen me researching this. I know you’ve seen the dents in the library’s tables. Didn’t you think I would have liked a clue?”

“I wanted to tell you, I really did. But I know how you get when you start obsessing over something and I didn’t want to ruin your efforts.”

“I was not obsessing!”

Celestia raised an eyebrow.

“OK... I was obsessing. Sorry.”

“Don’t start this again. If anyone should be sorry, it’s me for watching you get so caught up in your research and not saying anything about it.”

“Yeah... well. Anyways, now you can answer all my questions.”

“Where the magic came from, why it affects only baking, how some ponies can manipulate it?”

“Yes!”

“It’s a secret.” Celestia laughed. “Oh! If only you could see the look on your face!”

Luna did her best to scowl at her sister.

Celestia smiled and shook her head. “You’re this close to figuring it all out on your own. Do you really want me to spoil it for you?”

“Well... I guess not...”

“Tell you what. Tonight, after the competition is over, we’ll have a talk. I’ll tell you everything you want to know about the magic and in return, you need to tell me all the stories about the adventures you’ve been going on.”

Luna laughed nervously. “You, um... you know about those?”

“You’ve never been very good at keeping secrets from me. By the way. You forgot to create that illusion of you sleeping in your bed this morning. Don’t worry, I covered for you. So, do we have a deal?”

So many careless mistakes lately. Luna knew she would have to get some real sleep once this was over. “Deal,” she said.

“Good. I can’t wait to see you compete. Just remember, it isn’t about winning, it’s about giving the audience a show they’ll talk about for the rest of their lives.”

“I’ll be sure to do just that.” Luna smiled and looked at the position of the sun. “There’s still a couple hours before the competition. Would you like to get something to eat?”

“Of course,” Celestia said happily. “Though, I hope you don’t mind if an old friend of mine joins us.” Celestia nodded into the distance at Sweet Soufflé, who nodded back.

“Not as long as you don’t mind if a new friend of mine joins us.” Luna looked at Ditzzy, who was trying her hardest to look nonchalant while still trying to bounce like a fanfilly meeting her second super hero of the day.

# Chapter Ten

## This Ending Makes About As Much Sense As Anything Else That Has Happened Today

"I don't know, Spike. Are you sure about this?" Pinkie Pie said, hoof rubbing her chin.

"You saw how happy Princess Luna was when we caught the other impostor. We just had to catch this one too. He may not be a foalnapping dark magician but he still needs to be punished for trying to take our spot," Spike said as he pulled on some streamers.

"I guess so. He looks a little uncomfortable. Let me go get the folding chair!" Pinkie said as she bounced away.

"I can't believe you actually buried all of this stuff. You are crazy prepared when it comes to parties."

"One can never be too prepared when it comes to parties!"

There was a crash and a rubber chicken landed next to Spike.

"Found it!" Pinkie said as she rushed back with the folding chair and set it up. Spike pushed the captive into the chair.

Regal Din sat between the pink pony and baby dragon. He was wrapped up in streamers and had a party hat on. He said something that was muffled by the streamers around his muzzle. Pinkie Pie scrunched up her face in thought then put a pair of glasses with a fake nose on Regal. "Perfect!" she announced.

Regal's dressing room had been done up with party supplies. There were streamers, balloons and a piñata on the ceiling. Posters and a Pin-the-Tail-on-the-Pony game lined the wall. There was even a Bob-for-Apples tank. Sadly, the apples had not survived the prolonged burying.

"I'm sorry, Regal," Pinkie said. "I tried really hard to get some ponies to come to your party, but every pony I asked was too busy going to the competition tonight. Don't worry, though. I still got you some guests."

Pinkie walked up to a pile of rocks wearing a party hat, sitting on a stool. She nudged the rock pile and said, "Don't youse worry, Pinkie. We'll take real good cares of him for ya."

Pinkie smiled as Regal and noticed the look of confusion on his face. "Oh!" Pinkie said. "They don't actually talk so you'll have to do the voices for them!"

"Come on, Pinkie," Spike said from the doorway. "Lets take over the dressing room next door. It's much swankier now that the cages are gone."

"Coming, Spike! Bye, Regal. We'll come untie you once the contest is over. Just remember to not be a McRuderson anymore. Oh! And have fun!"

Pinkie turned on a record player and shut the door behind her. Regal looked at the sack of flour, ball of lint and bucket of turnips; his other 'guests' for the party that would last the next several hours. He started struggling harder.