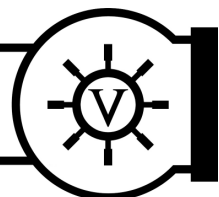


Sunny Skies All Day Long

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PONY FICTION VAULT



The sun was setting in Canterlot with the moon just creeping over the horizon. Princess Celestia walked into her bedroom, her mane put up into curlers. Luna followed close behind her, listening intently while sipping a cup of coffee as Celestia related the tale of her most recent visit to Ponyville.

"I mean, seriously Luna, this is the second time they could have avoided the problem by simply ASKING me. Why don't they feel like they can just talk to me? It's like I'm *Princess Celestia* instead of Princess *Celestia*."

Celestia's horn glowed as she levitated her crown off of her head. She briefly considered flinging it against the wall in frustration, but composed herself and set it down in its place on her bedside table. She floated over her nightgown to guard against the chill night air of the mountain as she vented her annoyance to her sister.

"I have everypony bowing and scraping before me over every little thing, as if I'd bring down my wrath upon them over a burnt biscuit or some-such frivolity. Just because I have power doesn't mean I fling it around willy-nilly! I mean, banishment over a pet? Where do they get such ideas?"

Luna said nothing, but dropped her eyes to the floor and took another sip of her coffee. Celestia's face softened and she walked over to Luna, raising Luna's head with a hoof and giving her a loving nuzzle.

"Oh Luna, don't give me that look. I banished Nightmare Moon, not Princess Luna. We've been over this, remember? You're my sister and I love you dearly."

Celestia smiled and walked over to the royal bed. She sighed as she pulled back the covers, looking back over at her younger sister.

"In fact, it seems like you're the only one I can talk to sometimes. As an equal at least. I wish sometimes everypony else could see past the crown and see *me*."

Luna smiled and set down her coffee as she walked over to Celestia.

"Why don't you?"

"Excuse me? I'm... not sure I understand. Why don't I what?"

"Why don't you set the crown down for a day? It sounds like you want a day off from being royalty."

Celestia just laughed and continued to prepare the bed.

"Oh, that's just silly. I have so much to do! I couldn't!"

"I'm sure you could make time if you tried. Say that you have an urgent meeting with somepony that just came up and can't wait."

Celestia paused in her work, pondering the practicality of the idea before shaking her head and lying down on her bed.

"...Oh, that does sounds tempting. But what am I thinking? Where would I go? I couldn't go anywhere without somepony seeing me. A visit from the Princess is always news."

Luna's smile broadened as the solution came to her.

"Then don't go as the Princess."

"Oh Luna, it's not like I can stop being... the... hmm..."

Luna walked up to Celestia's bed, highlighting the size difference between them.

"Remember how different I looked as Nightmare Moon than I do now? Would anyone recognize you without your power showing?"

Celestia sat up in bed, her eyes sparkling as the idea dug its way through her imagination.

"...That might actually work. It's been centuries since I took on my power. No pony would remember me without it. Oh... I would love to be able to talk to everypony without them worrying about my rank."

Luna laughed at her older sister's wistful expression and brought over a scroll and a pen.

"You should do it sis! It sounds like you need this. I don't think even your best student would recognize you!"

Celestia laughed and summoned an ink pot from across the room and started scribbling down some notes.

"You're right! It'd be nice to see Twilight casually. Heh, what did somepony hear her say that one time? 'There's nothing casual about a visit from royalty'? Well, perhaps that's true, but what about a visit from 'Sunny Skies'?"

Luna beamed to see Celestia so excited about her idea. She took the covers in her mouth and tucked Celestia in.

"I'll leave you to your planning sis. Have a restful night."

"You have a good night Luna. I'll see you when it's time for dawn."

Luna blew out the lamp, laughing as she heard a giggle of excitement from her normally composed big sister.

"Ooh, this is going to be FUN!"

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A few days later, Princess Celestia found herself by a lonely lake a fair ways outside of Canterlot. Pacing back and forth with excitement, she reviewed her mental checklist once more. She had managed to ditch her guards, as they thought she was meeting with a representative from Stalliongrad. With Luna's help, she left them guarding an empty room while she snuck out the back and made it to this nearby lake. Looking up at the sky, she noted that the sun was in its proper place and made a few last minute adjustments to its course to ensure it progressed properly throughout her day off.

Now... for the important part. Celestia closed her eyes and focused on herself. She could feel the power of the sun radiating through her, giving her the magnificent presence that made her stand out. The sun's power was a part of her, and she couldn't get rid of it. But she could cloak it. Focusing power through her horn, she dampened her own power. She felt itchy all over as she felt herself shrink down, and her mane and tail shorten. After a few minutes she opened her eyes again. The first thing to hit her was the fact that the world looked so different from a few feet closer to the ground. She trotted over to the lake, and peered into her own reflection. Looking back at her was a simple white alicorn with a plain pink mane and tail. Oh, it had been such a long time since she had looked like this.

Turning to the side she noted her cutie mark was still there. That simply would not do. Every coin of Equestria had her cutie mark on it, and Luna's on the reverse. But she had come prepared. Taking a satchel she had brought with her, she stashed her crown, gilded boots, and necklace in it. No ordinary pony would have such things! Then she removed a large sticker from the satchel and levitated it over to her flank. Not even she could make a cutie mark appear or disappear, but thankfully there were more mundane methods at her disposal. Applying the sticker to her flank, she examined the results. Her own distinctive

sun cutie mark had been masked, and a simpler sun design put in its place, flanked by a few tiny clouds. Perfectly suitable for the pseudonym of "Sunny Skies" she had chosen for herself.

Looking back at her reflection, she examined her horn. She could not expect to be completely incognito while having both wings and a horn. Luna and herself were the only two ponies like that! But while she couldn't take off her horn, she *could* hide it. Mentally poking inward at herself, she noted that the power of the sun was still there, but dormant. She couldn't use its power without waking it up, and then she'd have to start the whole process over again. But the usual magic of all unicorns was still at her beck and call. Removing some notes from the satchel, she reviewed them one last time, and began to cast a spell. While she couldn't remove her horn with anything short of physical force (sun and moon forbid that happen to *anypony!*) she could make her horn invisible for the day.

Celestia felt a goofy grin spread over her face as she reviewed her appearance in the lake's surface once more. It was perfect. Perfect! She just looked like an ordinary pegasus now! No more stuffy formalities, no more bowing and scraping at her approach, no more ponies fretting over proper decorum now that she was free! She left the satchel full of her belongings in the place she had arranged for Luna to pick up later, and then sprung into the sky with a whoop and a peal of laughter! She noticed that even her voice sounded slightly younger with this smaller body, making her break out in laughter again with this unexpected benefit. With powerful flaps of her wings she flew higher and higher into the sky before leveling off and surveying the land. Oh, this was so much more fun than that chariot they always insisted she ride around in! She reveled in her new-found freedom. She had the entire day to herself and nopony would worry about being perfect in front of the princess! Forecast calls for Sunny Skies today!

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Celest... er... Sunny Skies flew along just above what few clouds were in the sky. She found herself heading towards Ponyville, and Luna's words rang through her head again. Would her disguise fool her best student? Ha. It certainly would! Celestia decided she would put the theory to the test. Besides, she wanted to see firsthand what Twilight's friends were like. Everypony was so nervous and on edge during her latest visit. That could *not* have been an accurate representation. But in the meantime, it felt so good to be able to stretch her wings and just... *enjoy* herself flying. On a whim, she did a few flips in the air and threw herself into a diving corkscrew before pulling up and landing on a cloud.

"Hey, that wasn't bad!"

Celestia looked up as a familiar blue pegasus with a rainbow colored mane flew over to her cloud. This was one of Twilight's friends wasn't it? Ah yes, the filly who had won the Young Fliers competition, Rainbow Dash! Rainbow landed on the cloud with a small puff, extending a hoof for a high-hoof to Celestia.

"I was just practicing my own tricks and happened to see that neat corkscrew you did. You weren't half bad! Lots of ponies think it's a simple trick and end up getting dizzy and crash."

Celestia smiled at the compliment, and slapped Rainbow's hoof.

"Thanks, but I'm no trick flier."

"Yeah, but that was still good for an amateur. Trust me, I should know!"

Celestia noted wryly to herself that she had over a thousand years of flying experience, but smiled and let the comment pass. Rainbow straightened up, flaring her wings and bringing a hoof to her chest.

"Perhaps I should introduce myself. I'm Rainbow Dash! Best Young Flier in Equestria! Hey, I don't think I've seen you around. Are you new here?"

"Oh, me? No, I'm just visiting for the day. I'm from Fillydelphia. My name's Sunny Skies."

Rainbow jumped off the cloud and hovered in front of Celestia.

"Well, it's nice to see a new pegasus around here! Hey, why don't I go with you into town? I'll show you some really cool tricks I've been practicing. C'mon!"

Celestia grinned at Rainbow's enthusiasm and took off after her.

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"Oh wow, that trick was really amazing!"

Rainbow Dash and Celestia laughed as they flew near the outskirts of town. Rainbow had been showing off her best tricks to her new friend. Celestia had tried to copy a few of the easier looking ones, barely managing to pull off one of them. The other two ended up having her embedded in an apple tree. Thankfully Rainbow had plenty of first hand

experience on crash recovery, and the two had shared a laugh pulling twigs out of Celestia's mane.

"Thanks, Sunny! That's one of Thundermane's tricks that he used in the Wonderbolts' air show a few months back. Let me tell you, some of their stuff is wicked hard! But I'm going to learn all of them one of these days!"

Celestia looked taken aback at that, having seen several of their shows in person. And having just tried a few 'simple' tricks, those daredevil stunts she had seen now seemed even more impressive. The Wonderbolts were experts, and while Rainbow was great, some of those tricks were downright dangerous!

"Even the 'Loom of Doom'?"

Rainbow looked surprised at that suggestion looking back at Celestia.

"The Loom of Doom? They just revealed that one at their annual show in Canterlot a couple of weeks ago! That's the hardest thing I've *ever* heard them do. I'm... I'm... not sure if I'm ready for that stuff. Um, at least not right now! But soon! If they can do it, then I can too!"

Rainbow quickly pulled herself together after that brief slip in confidence, and looked at Celestia in puzzlement as a thought occurred to her.

"How did you know about that trick anyway? Were you in Canterlot for their show?"

Celestia tried to keep what she hoped looked like a relaxed smile on her face while she frantically searched for an acceptable answer.

"Um... yes! Yes I was. I got them... er... a friend of mine got a pair of tickets. And she asked me to go! I'd never been to Canterlot before!"

"Wow, lucky girl. Those tickets were really expensive. I'd have to save up for, like, a whole *year* to go to their show in Canterlot! Ooh! Do you think she could get me some? I'd love to go next time!"

"Uh... sorry, she got them... in a contest. Yeah."

Rainbow Dash looked askance at Celestia as they flew down towards the town square.

"You okay, Sunny? You're not looking that hot."

"Yes, I'm fine! I think I... just turned my stomach a little with that last trick."

Rainbow Dash shrugged and landed in Mane Street.

"Yeah, that happens from time to time. It'll pass. G-forces will do that to you if you're not careful. Well, here we are!"

Rainbow Dash grinned and extended a hoof to Celestia.

"Hey Sunny, I had fun flying with you! I love meeting pegasus ponies that like stunt flying. Come by my place next time you're in the area and we'll practice together, okay?"

Celestia finally relaxed a bit and she slapped Rainbow Dash's hoof. Rainbow Dash flew off, claiming she had to finish some weather chores she had put off, so Celestia trotted into town. Walking around town among so many ponies without everypony bowing to her and clearing a path around her made Celestia smile. She broke into a prance, giggling to herself like a little filly. Her disguise worked! It was... refreshing! She found herself so caught up in these new experiences that she didn't watch where she was going, and walked straight into Twilight Sparkle attempting to walk and read at the same time. Twilight recovered first, and helped Celestia to her hooves.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, miss! I just got too engrossed in this book, and wasn't watching where I was going. Are you all right?"

As the dust settled, Celestia shook her head to clear all the cobwebs out of it. Her heart skipped a beat as she realised her disguise would be put to the test. If anyone could pierce her disguise, her best student could.

"I'm... I'm okay. I wasn't exactly paying attention either, so I guess it's my fault as well."

"I shouldn't have been reading while walking."

"I shouldn't have had my head in the clouds."

Both ponies smiled at each other awkwardly before bursting out laughing. Celestia picked up Twilight's dropped book.

"You dropped this, miss...?"

"Oh, thank you! I'm Twilight Sparkle. Nice to meet you."

Twilight looked confused for a moment, staring at Celestia.

"Don't I know you from somewhere? You seem... familiar."

Celestia's eyes darted around, looking for a way to get out of this situation.

"Oh... no, this is my first time in Ponyville. My name is Sunny Skies!"

Twilight rubbed her chin, trying to remember what seemed so familiar.

"Argh, this is going to bother me all day if I don't figure it out. I used to live in Canterlot. Are you from there?"

Celestia found herself sweating slightly. It wasn't even noon yet, and her whole day might be ruined if she didn't talk her way out of this.

"NO! I mean, no. That is, I've never been there. Well, just once, but that was just for a Wonderbolt show. Ask Rainbow Dash!"

"Are... are you okay? You sound nervous."

"Well, I am, kinda. New place and everything."

Twilight shrugged and led Celestia into the town square.

"Well, this is a pretty nice place, Sunny. You have nothing to worry about. Ponyville loves new ponies in town."

"Did somepony say 'NEW PONY'?"

Suddenly a pink pony with tail and mane like cotton candy popped out of a stand of produce. Celestia immediately recognized her. No pony *ever* forgot Pinkie Pie after meeting her once. She pulled herself out of the stand, and fell with a flop in front of Celestia. Looking up with a smile, Pinkie Pie locked eyes with Celestia. A slideshow of emotions crossed Pinkie's face in a manner of seconds. First surprise, then shock, panic, a quick burst of comprehension, culminating with a big smile before Pinkie Pie shot up straight in the air. She let out a long and drawn out dramatic gasp before bolting away. As the pink blur dashed off into Ponyville, Celestia mentally kicked herself. Pinkie Pie. It had to be *Pinkie Pie*. She *knew*! She didn't know how she knew, but it was unmistakable! Twilight patted Celestia's hide, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, don't mind her. That's just Pinkie Pie. She did the same thing when I came to town. She's probably gathering party supplies right now! Well, it was nice meeting you, but I have some tests to conduct. Drop by the Library if you need anything!"

Waving goodbye to Twilight, Celestia flew off in the opposite direction that Pinkie Pie went. She didn't know what Pinkie was doing, but if Celestia wanted to keep her cover, she'd need to stay as far away as possible.

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Celestia stopped running, and found herself on the outskirts of town. She let out a sigh of relief. She was safe! While pondering what to do with her day off in Ponyville, a quick shout of annoyance attracted her attention.

"Pull Bic Mac, PULL! Oh, this blasted wagon had to get stuck today of all days."

Flying up in the air to locate the source of the sound, Celestia saw a cart of apples down on the road a little ways off, stuck fast in a mud puddle. Two earth ponies were trying to free it and Celestia tried to pull their names from her memory. Applejack, wasn't it? That would make the other one Big Macintosh she supposed. Celestia flew down, landing next to Applejack.

"Having problems with your cart?"

Applejack snorted as she tried to push the cart free while Big Mac hauled from the front.

"T'ain't the cart we're having problems with, it's this darn mud we're having problems with! The rain from two days back made this place 'specially muddy and it ain't dried up yet, and now the cart's stuck! Ah knew it would be hard, but Ah thought Big Mac and I would be able to get through to Ponyville with not too much trouble. But now we're stuck tighter than caramel on a candy apple! Ain't that right Big Mac?"

Big Mac stopped pulling his yoke, and took a few breaths, switching the stalk of straw he was chewing from one side of his mouth to the other.

"...Eeeyup."

Applejack tried pushing the cart once more before turning around and giving it a vicious, but ineffective kick.

"And if we don't get this here cart of Jonathan apples to the market, we can't sell 'em! And we can't get this cart to the market if this cart. Won't. MOVE!"

Applejack punctuated each word with another shoulder charge at the cart, which only served to get the orange pony even muddier than she was before.

"Reckon that loosened it any Big Mac?"

"...Nnnope."

"Dagnabbit!"

Applejack plopped herself down on the side of the road, her sides heaving as she caught her breath. Celestia bit her lip, wanting desperately to help. Several solutions drifted through Celestia's head as she looked at the frustrated ponies. But unicorn magic would blow her cover, and she couldn't make the sun dry up the mud, as that would undo all the effort she put into her disguise. Still, if there was anything she could do to help, she would do it.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

Her pride stung, Applejack looked like she wanted to refuse at first, but a look from Big Mac softened her expression.

"...Sure. I reckon we can use all the help we can get."

Celestia soon found herself lassoed to the cart and pulling at the cart from above while Applejack and Big Mac pulled down on the ground.

"Grr! Pull y'all! Ah think we're moving it!"

Celestia scrunched her eyes shut while pulling the cart. Her chariot chauffeurs made this look easy. They pulled her and a chariot, surely she could pull a measly cart of apples! Then again, she weighed less than a cart of apples. At least, she hoped she did! It took a few minutes, but between the three of them, the wagon was moving slowly. Then with a jerk, the cart popped free of the mud, sending Celestia flying out of control. With a giant splash, she landed in yet another mud puddle. Applejack and Big Mac quickly trotted over.

"Oh dear, are you all right, miss?"

Checking all her extremities, Celestia nodded a bit sheepishly. Being sore and covered in mud was somewhat of a new experience for her. She winced as she rose to her hooves, dripping mud.

"Yes, I'm fine, if a bit messy. I'm a bit sore, but I don't hurt. Not in a bad way at least. It... feels kinda nice? Is that normal?"

"...Y'ain't done some heavy work before, have 'ya?"

Celestia shook off the worst of the mud. Her royal duties definitely were not this physically strenuous. But that didn't make them easy, despite what some ponies believed. Even not counting raising the sun at the crack of, well... dawn, she didn't consider running an entire country a 'cushy gig'.

"Yes, I do hard work! I don't sit on my rump all day!"

Applejack backed up a step at this outburst.

"Whoa there, Nelly. Didn't mean to give you that idea! Ah jus' meant you don't look like you're used to haulin' stuff 'round."

Celestia looked around guiltily after her outburst. She was in disguise. Of course Applejack hadn't been slighting her duties!

"Oh... I'm sorry. I –"

"That there is good ol' fashioned earth pony work. Didn't mean t'say you didn't work hard. We're just built for it!"

"Of course you didn't mean –"

"But yeah, that's just what it feels like after a good ol' workout! Lets ya know you've done a good bit of solid work! And Ah beg your pardon, Ah didn't think the cart would jump free like that. But thanks for the help with the cart miss... oh heavens to Betsy, ah never got your name!"

Celestia paused for a second, making sure Applejack had finished. She scuffed a hoof at the ground nervously.

"That's quite all right. I shouldn't have snapped at you. I apologize. It's just that... uh... some ponies think I have an easy job. I'm Sunny Skies, and I –"

Applejack wasted no time on walking right over and shaking Celestia's muddy hoof firmly.

"Oh, don't worry your little heart. I ain't mad at ya! Jus' a simple mistake, that's all. Everypony does that from time t'time. Pleasure makin' your acquaintance! Sorry 'bout gettin' y'all muddy like that. How 'bout you take some apples as a 'thank you?'"

Before Celestia could object, Applejack had slung a saddlebag of apples over her back.

"Thank you, but you don't need to do that."

"Oh, Ah insist! It's the least Ah could do. Ah'd love t'stay and chat for a spell, but we need to get movin' if we're going t'sell these here apples. Oh, and before Ah go, if you're wantin' to get rid of that mud, my friend Rarity tells me there's a wonderful spa right here in Ponyville! Though they put mud on you there, or somethin' like that. Never understood that sophisticated nonsense. You ready Big Mac?"

"...Eeeeyup."

"Right then! C'mon Big Mac, let's get a move on."

Celestia considered tagging along and helping them sell apples today, but then she spotted Pinkie Pie blithely trotting down the road with a bucket of soapy water in her mouth. Pinkie set down the bucket and spoke to a pony at a stall selling flowers.

"Hi there, Rose! Have you seen somepony covered in mud? My ears were floppy, and you know what that means!"

Deciding quickly that a bath at the spa would feel nice, Celestia entered Ponyville by another route.

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Looking over the variety of services the spa offered, Celestia turned when she heard the dingle of the bell above the door. In walked a white pony with a expertly coiffed purple mane and tail. But the dress that she wore struck her the most. Not only was it stunning, but it was also... familiar? Celestia smiled in comprehension as one of Twilight's letters came to memory. Hoity Toity had showed off a collection of dresses in his boutique in Canterlot from Twilight's designer friend, Rarity. She seemed a bit more low key than usual.

"Hello Lotus, hello Aloe! The usual, please."

"Certainly, miss Rarity. Will miss Fluttershy be coming today as well?"

Rarity sighed, setting aside some of the more superfluous elements of her dress.

"I'm afraid not, girls. She had an emergency with one of her animals and couldn't come. I thought about asking somepony else, but honestly, could you imagine Applejack or Rainbow Dash here? Twilight is busy searching through her old yearbooks for something, and I don't think inviting Pinkie Pie would be such a good idea after last time."

"We did manage to get the stains out the drapes though."

"Well, thank goodness for that. But it looks like today I'll be... alone!"

Celestia smiled and rolled her eyes at Rarity's dramatics as she walked up to the counter.

"Hello. May I please have a hot bath and a coat brushing? I fell into a mud puddle while helping somepony, and they recommended this place to me."

Rarity looked agape at Celestia.

"*Just* a bath and brushing? Why no, no, no! Yes, you need the mud cleaned off, but look at your mane! Look at your coat!"

Celestia looked at herself in a nearby mirror.

"What's wrong with them?"

"What's wrong with them? Darling, you have wonderful coloration, but honestly, they're a bit drab, no? How have you been taking care of it?"

Yes, compared to her normal mane and tail, the plain pink was a bit drab, Celestia admitted to herself. They also took care of themselves as well, channeling the radiance of the sun to enhance their beauty.

"Well, just the normal things, like washing and brushing. Nothing special, really."

Rarity gasped in shock.

"Your coloration is too good not to show off! Oh, this simply won't do! You should have much more than just a simple bath! I know, you can be my spa buddy today! Lotus? Book miss... oh, I beg your pardon, I didn't catch your name!"

"I'm Sunny Skies. I'm just visiting for the day, but you don't need to trouble yourself on my behalf."

"Oh no, it would pain me all day if I simply let this opportunity slip through my hooves! Now, Lotus, as I was saying, book miss Skies here for my usual treatment as a guest on my account."

"Yes, miss Rarity."

Celestia backed up anxiously. This was getting a little too close to what she intended to avoid in the first place.

"Are you sure? I don't need this special treatment."

Rarity disappeared behind the screen and quickly changed out of her dress.

"Of course you do, dear! You deserve the royal treatment!"

Celestia was grateful that Rarity couldn't see her wince at her choice of words.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that..."

Rarity came back out and donned her spa robe.

"Nonsense darling, it would be my pleasure! And then you can come over to my boutique afterwards and perhaps we'll find you a new outfit to match."

Celestia bit her lip, unsure on whether she wanted the 'royal treatment'. Rarity, noticing her hesitation, narrowed her eyes and walked up to Celestia.

"I. *Insist*. I won't take no for an answer!"

"Well, okay then. If you don't mind."

"It's no trouble at all! *You* need some sprucing up, and *I* need a spa buddy today. It's perfect! And you really can't call a trip to Ponyville complete without experiencing the luxury of Healing Waters spa!"

Celestia relented and put on a robe and let herself be led into the spa proper by Rarity.

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Celestia sighed in bliss as the mareseuse rubbed at her tight muscles. It had been far too long since she had a decent back rub. She was always too busy with first one thing and then another. Something always seemed to come up that simply had to be handled right then and there. Rarity, on the table next to her levitated a quill and drew absently on a sketchpad.

"Now Sunny, I've had a few ideas for your dress, and wanted to see what you thought."

"Oh Rarity, I told you that you don't need to worry about –"

Rarity waved her off with a hoof.

"No no no, I don't want to hear about it! Inspiration has hit me, and I can't ignore it! Now, what style of dress do you prefer? A proper dress has to fit the pony's personality as well as look stunning."

Celestia quickly dug around in the dustier memory vaults of her mind. She normally just wore her regalia, as her stature and flowing mane and tail were impressive enough on their own.

"Well... I did enjoy Lacy Satin's work..."

Rarity snorted and rolled her eyes.

"Oh dear, no pony has worn Satin's designs in decades! I'm surprised you even remember her."

Celestia tensed up. Decades? Really? Had it been that long? Time flew by so quickly when one lived over a thousand years.

"Oh... uh... I... um..."

"Try to relax, miss."

A firm hoof on her shoulders broke her panic and a few firm rubs forced her to relax again. A few deep breaths calmed her down."

"Yes, I like the traditional style. Something simple and elegant. Not too gaudy."

Rarity nodded and made a few corrections to her sketch.

"So nothing gem encrusted I take it. Pity. I do so love working with jewels. Still, if you enjoy the traditional style, I think I know just the thing for you! Now, let's talk colors. I think we'll want to play up the morning colors that your personal pallet suggests. How about some light greens and blues? You'll look just like a morning sunrise! *And* it fits your name perfectly!"

Rarity quickly engrossed herself with the design, adding details and making changes as her artistic muse suggested them. Celestia smiled and watched as the attendant massaged her wing muscles. She would have to see if she could spare some time for this once in a while when she got home, it felt heavenly!

"...add some finishing touches and there!"

Celestia snapped from her reverie as Rarity finished her preliminary sketch and floated the pad over to Celestia. Looking at the sketch, Celestia was impressed by the design. The outfit even recalled some elements of her empowered form.

"Voila! You'll look simply stunning in that ensemble. You'll look just like a princess!"

Celestia's face froze and her wings flared at the reference, hitting the attendant behind her in the snout.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to –"

The mareseuse gently folded Celestia's wings and started working on her shoulders.

"It's fine, miss Skies. Please relax."

Celestia smiled stiffly at Rarity, hoping she didn't make the connection.

"Sorry, I was just surprised. It looks wonderful!"

The rest of the spa treatment was uneventful, but very enjoyable. Rarity gushed over the results of the treatment.

"See? What did I tell you? Your mane simply shines now, and your coat is lustrous! Is this not simply magnificent?"

Celestia admired herself in the mirror. It *did* look a lot better. She wasn't sure if any of this would apply to her empowered form. Treating her mane usually proved difficult when it wouldn't stop blowing in the solar wind.

"Come by my boutique later today and we'll get you fitted for your dress."

They walked by the spa's giant tub, when Pinkie Pie erupted from a bucket of sponges nearby.

"Hey Rarity! How you doing? This sponge bath is pretty nifty, but I don't get what it's supposed to do. Oh hey! New pony whose name I don't know! I've been looking all over for you! You're pretty good at hiding! We should totally play hide and seek some more later! You'll never find me!"

Celestia's mind gave up on figuring out how Pinkie fit into the bucket, and conceded that Pinkie Pie would likely prove impossible to beat in hide and go seek. Rarity looked back and forth between the two.

"Let me introduce you two. Sunny, this is my friend Pinkie Pie. Pinkie Pie, this is Sunny Skies."

Rarity leaned in to whisper in Celestia's ear.

"Don't think too hard about the stuff she does. 'It's Pinkie Pie' is generally considered an adequate explanation in Ponyville for most anything involving her."

Celestia slapped a grin on her face and shook Pinkie's hoof.

"Nice to meet you Pinkie Pie."

Pinkie Pie gave a squeak of excitement and dove back down into the bucket before reemerging with an envelope between her teeth, scattering sponges everywhere.

"Ooh, I almost forgot! It's your first day in Ponyville, isn't it? Of course it is! I would know if you'd been here before, because I know *everypony* in Ponyville! So I'm throwing you a party today! Here's your invitation!"

Celestia took the invitation and opened it. Scanning the glitter covered letter, Celestia looked up at Pinkie Pie. She was sure Pinkie knew her identity earlier. But at least she was keeping her secret for now. Perhaps she had simply forgotten about it. Her thoughts

were interrupted by the clock in town square striking the hour. Pinkie gasped and grabbed Celestia by the hoof and dragged her out the door.

"Oh no! It's about to start! I spent so much time playing hide and seek with you, I lost track of time! Let's go!"

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The party was full of energy, and Celestia felt a little overwhelmed by it all. Nonetheless, a grin slowly crept over her face as she acclimated herself to it. Pinkie Pie bounded around the room, seeming to be in several places at once chatting up guests, eating and refilling the sweets, and making sure everypony had a good time. Celestia marveled at her infectious energy, enjoying herself more and more all the while. She seemed to content herself with keeping Celestia's secret, if she indeed knew it. Perhaps she had just imagined it after all. Just then, Pinkie popped up in front of her with a tray of cupcakes on her head.

"Hi there, Sunny! Having a good time? Have a cupcake!"

Thanking Pinkie, she took one and bite into it while Pinkie Pie bounced off to somepony else. Her eyes widened as she felt a familiar heat burn in her mouth. Chili and chocolate flavored cupcakes. That was her favorite flavor! She knew that wasn't a common flavor, so were these cupcakes baked just for her? She quickly swallowed the cupcake as panic gripped her heart again. She hadn't imagined it, Pinkie *did* know! Glancing around she backed up towards the back of the room. If Pinkie broke her cover, intentionally or no, she didn't want it to happen in the middle of a party! She'd never be able to use this disguise again if word got spread around that quickly. Not looking where she went, Celestia accidentally bumped into a yellow pegasus standing meekly by herself on the sidelines. Celestia quickly identified the startled pony as Fluttershy, the incident with Philomena still fresh in her mind.

"Pardon me, I didn't see you there!"

"Oh... that's okay. I'm all right."

Celestia looked around. Verifying that Pinkie Pie had busied herself elsewhere, she sat down next to Fluttershy.

"You're Fluttershy, aren't you? I'm Sunny Skies. Rarity told me all about you at the spa today."

Fluttershy just stared at the floor.

"Oh... thank you. She isn't mad that I had to cancel, is she?"

"Oh no, she was quite understanding. One of your animals was injured I hear? Are they better now?"

Fluttershy looked up smiling, looking Celestia straight in the eyes for the first time.

"Oh, yes! A poor little squirrel from the forest fell from a tree and broke a paw! I simply *had* to help the poor little thing! But with a little tender love and care, he should be back on his paws in no time."

"That's good to hear. From what I'm told, you have quite the way with animals."

Fluttershy lowered her eyes demurely.

"Oh... it's just my special talent. Everypony has something they're good at. What's yours?"

Celestia stiffened a tad, and her eyes darted around looking for inspiration. 'Raising the sun' would *not* be an acceptable answer. She spotted Twilight Sparkle arrive a tad late with a few books in her satchel, and was immediately swept into the party by Pinkie Pie. She smiled as an idea struck her. This would do nicely.

"Oh... I'm... a traveling storyteller! I go from place to place telling old stories and picking up new ones, making friends wherever I go."

"Oh, how nice. I love a good story. I like to tell all the animals one before they go to bed. Would you mind telling me a story? Um... if you don't mind, that is."

Celestia's heart dropped into her stomach as her plan backfired. She scanned her memory, looking for one she could tell easily enough. However, most of the tales that she knew involved her in some fashion or another. Well, they did say 'tell what you know best'...

"Well, I suppose I can. How about a story about how the Everfree Forest became the way it did?"

Fluttershy settled down, and looked up at Celestia expectantly with big eyes and a smile. Celestia cleared her throat and began with the standard Equestrian story opening.

"Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria..."

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On the other side of the room, Twilight had gathered together with some of her friends.

"Wow Pinkie, you went all out with this one."

"Uh huh! What pony doesn't deserve a super special awesome party? Ooh! We need more streamers, stay right here!"

Twilight shook her head at Pinkie's randomness and turned to the others.

"Girls, it's been bugging me all day, I know I've seen Sunny somewhere before. But I just can't place it."

Rainbow Dash shrugged.

"All I know is that she's a pretty good flier. She said she's from Fillydelphia though."

Twilight rubbed her chin in thought.

"She said the same to me. But if she's not from here, the only other place I really could know her from would be Canterlot."

"No way. She said she'd only been there for the Wonderbolts show."

"Yeah, she told me that too. Pretty emphatically too. Almost like she was hiding something."

Applejack piped up after polishing off an apple tart.

"Why would she need to do that? Nothin' wrong with Canterlot. Though, come t'think 'bout it, she did mention someponies thought she had a cushy job that's harder than it looks. Would make sense if she's from Canterlot. Lots of upper class ponies up there."

Rarity dabbed at her mouth with a levitated napkin, laying aside her cup of punch.

"Well, I don't know her too well, but she certainly has good taste. Old fashioned, sure, but good taste nonetheless."

Twilight grunted in frustration.

"This is going to drive me up the wall! Where have I seen her?"

They were interrupted as Fluttershy and Celestia walked over.

"That was amazing, Sunny. You're a good storyteller! It was almost like you were *there!*"

Celestia smiled awkwardly, glancing at all the ponies around.

"Oh... thank you. You're too kind."

Fluttershy gestured to Twilight.

"Sunny is a traveling storyteller, and she's really good. She says she collects new stories from places she visits. Do you think you have a book of stories she can have?"

Twilight blinked in surprise.

"Stories? I... think so? Most of my collection is mostly research, but I think I have something in the fiction section that might suit you. How about we head over to my library after the party, and I'll see what I can dig up."

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Celestia, Twilight, and her friends headed out laughing after the party. Arriving at the library, Twilight invited everypony inside. She quickly headed over to the fiction section and started pulling out books one by one before throwing each to the side.

"This will only take a moment. Spike? Are you here Spike?"

The little dragon came down the stairs carrying a stack of books.

"What is it Twilight? Oh, hi everypony."

"Spike, did you ever find that copy of that book on advanced teleportation like I asked?"

Spike sighed and set down his stack of books before walking over to start cleaning up the mess Twilight was making.

"No. It wasn't easy sorting through all this mess. I'm pretty sure there's a copy at your old quarters in Canterlot though."

"Well, that will have to do. Draft up a request to have it sent here, would you please? Aha! Here's that book of old myths, fables, and mare's tales."

Spike nodded and started scribbling on parchment. Twilight looked around at the mess she created, and the leftover piles of books from her previous attempts to locate books.

"Please pardon the mess. I've been pretty busy lately."

Rarity snorted and magically straightened a pile or two.

"It wouldn't get this way if you'd stop dropping books on the floor and organize things once in a while."

"Oh Rarity, but there's so much to do! So much to learn!"

Celestia chuckled to herself. Despite learning the magic of friendship, at the core she remained the studious bookpony she remembered. Over on the other side of the room, Spike had finished his letter, and headed towards the window. Something nagged at Celestia's mind that she needed to remember, but she brushed it away.

"Twilight, just make sure you get some fresh air once in a while. Take a break. Learning's fine, but you must simply stop reading those dusty old books!"

Twilight gasped and dropped the book she magically held at that familiar phrase. Princess Celestia had told her something very similar in the letter that had sent her to Ponyville. Suddenly, all the various clues she had gathered from everypony clicked into place in her mind. She whirled around in horror and looked at Celestia, trying to fit Sunny Skies into her mental image of Princess Celestia. She flew over a book of Equestria History and flipped open to a page she knew very well. It pictured a younger Princess Celestia, back from before the revolt of Nightmare Moon. She looked back and forth between the page and a visibly sweating Sunny Skies. That couldn't be true...

Celestia looked for an excuse to leave, but Spike was already over by the window, and he incinerated the letter with a jet of green flame. The smoke curled out the window... and then promptly came back in. It flew over to Celestia, rematerialized as the sealed letter, and landed with a plop in front of her. Twilight gasped and bowed low to the ground as this last piece of evidence banished any doubt.

"P-P-Princess Celestia?"

Everypony's face froze in shock in turn as what they realized what Twilight said. Unfortunately, Celestia's guilty face only served to confirm their suspicions. One by one, the accidental hints she had dropped suddenly made sense to each one of Twilight's friends, and their faces turned to horror as they reinterpreted their experiences together with Sunny Skies in light of this new information. Celestia drooped her head. This was exactly what she had been trying to avoid all day. Applejack was the first to speak, saying what they all had on their mind in one form or another.

"Oh hayseed, did I just make our princess haul an apple cart and then dump her in a puddle of mud afterwards?"

Celestia sighed and smiled wanly.

"I suppose it's no use pretending anymore."

With a shake of her head, she reached inside her with her magic and cast aside the cloak she had put on her power. The power of the sun radiated through her body, enveloping her in a nimbus of light as she grew back to her majestic proportions and her mane and tail grew back to their multi-hued form and started blowing in the solar wind. Everypony was quick to bow low to the ground, not daring to make eye contact with their princess. Looking over the assembly, Celestia snorted.

"Oh, will you all please stop that! Why do you think I came here like this in the first place?"

Fluttershy looked up at Celestia from between her hooves, terrified.

"T-t-to spy on us?"

Celestia just shook her head and gestured for everypony to rise.

"No, of course not! Am I not allowed to have fun? I need a break from time to time. While royal life is nice, it can get... tiring. Not physically, but I needed a break from everypony treating me like royalty, somepony with whom you needed to be perfect. *That's* why I came down here disguised. I just wanted a day off from all that."

Rainbow Dash looked up quizzically.

"So... you're not mad that I got you crashed into a tree?"

"Or put to work and dumped into a mud puddle?"

"Or that I insulted your fashion sense?"

"Wait, you mean you didn't know she was the Princess? I thought everypony knew who she was. She just wanted to have some fun!"

Everypony looked at the confused Pinkie Pie while Celestia just laughed.

"Pinkie has the right idea. I *enjoyed* my time with all of you. Each and every one of you! Just because I'm a princess doesn't mean I can't enjoy the simpler, and sometimes messy, things of life. You had fun with Sunny Skies today, didn't you? Does knowing who I really was change that fact?"

Twilight smiled nervously.

"I... guess not. I guess I'm just not used to seeing you in that light."

Rainbow Dash broke into smiles and launched herself in the air, pumping her hooves, chanting in a sing-song voice.

"YES! I'm buddies with the Princess! I'm buddies with the Princess!"

With a quick flash of magic and a roguish grin, Celestia firmly grounded Rainbow.

"You are buddies with *Sunny Skies*. Being 'best buddies' with *Princess Celestia* might make things... political. And I don't think you want to add that complication to your life."

Pinkie Pie bounced up to Celestia.

"Don't worry, we can keep a secret! Right girls? Otherwise..."

Pinkie Pie sent a warning and knowing glance at the others. Twilight sighed.

"...*Forever, yes we know, Pinkie.*"

She and the others quickly promised, and Pinkie returned to her normal cheery self.

"The day's far from over! So, can Sunny come out and play today?"

With a wink and a grin, Celestia quickly transformed herself back into her diminutive form.

"I thought you'd never ask!"

The group cheered and trooped outside. Twilight hung back alongside Celestia.

"I never knew you had this side to you, Princess... er... Sunny."

"There's a lot about me you don't know, Twilight."

Twilight paused for a moment, trying to figure out how to phrase her next question.

"So, does that mean we'll see more of Sunny Skies after today?"

Celestia gave Twilight a teasing grin.

"Oh, you never know. She might show up again when you least expect it!"

Twilight reciprocated Celestia's grin.

"Oh, I think we'd like that."

The two rejoined the group laughing as they discussed how to spend the rest of the day.

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The following sunrise found Princess Celestia back in Canterlot, recounting the events of the day to her yawning younger sister.

"And they were fine with spending the day with a Princess?"

"It took some time, and some gentle reminders, for them to get used to the idea, but yes."

"So, was it as fun as you imagined?"

"I certainly enjoyed it whenever I managed to stop worrying about my disguise. It was quite refreshing. Thanks for suggesting it."

"It's the least I can do for my big sis. Well, I need to hit the hay. I'll see you when it's time for dusk."

Luna walked towards the door, before grinning and turning back around.

"Have a good day, 'Sunny'."

Celestia grinned and playfully tossed a cushion at Luna as her laughing sister retreated down the hall.