

Bringing Up Blueblood

A "My Little Pony Friendship Is Magic" Fanfiction

-AND-

A Wholly Unnecessary Spinoff of "My Little Alicorn"

By InsertAuthorHere

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Chapter Ten

To Blueblood's amazement, the morning guard gathering seemed...different. Rather than the usual tightly-knit square formations and perfectly-measured lines Shining Armor expected – neigh, demanded – everypony appeared to be simply hanging loose and mingling, as if at a social gathering rather than attending serious training lessons. The Captain himself stood alongside a few other high-ranking officers, all wearing different-colored sets of armor to denote their ranking amongst the few, the proud, the Royal Guards. Even stranger, however, was clipboard levitating in front of Shining. Normally the guards were all checked off by the quartermaster as they entered the grounds, not by the Captain himself.

After a few more moments, the cadre of officers nodded amongst themselves and dispersed, leaving only Shining Armor and his loyal troops remaining. Blueblood, sensing that the coast was officially clear, trotted ahead towards his CO, who seemed to remain oblivious to his presence until he felt something tapping him in the fetlock. "What's going on?"

Shining looked down from his clipboard, and upon seeing Blueblood, barely fought back the urge to facehoof himself. *Horse apples, I forgot about that.* "I...thought somepony had already told you. We're not doing the usual drills and exercises today. We had to move our combat evaluations up to this morning."

Blueblood cocked an eyebrow. "Combat...evaluations?"

Shining Armor sighed deeply. "You really have no idea what these are? Didn't you attend guard training at the Academy?"

The colt scoffed at this insult to his manliness. "Of course I did! I just...I never saw us doing anything combat-related in these drills. It was all exercises and discipline. We never even had weapons all this time."

"That's because combat training is usually handled in the afternoon. Even then, everypony's

training schedule is staggered so the castle won't be left unguarded. The last time we were understaffed, a pair of private investigators apparently broke into the castle and removed some incriminating documents." Armor sighed. "Apparently all the security breaches happen while I'm away. It was Discord all over again..."

"Um...Captain?"

A armor shook his head vigorously, dispelling his thoughts of inadequacy and failure, and returned his attention to the inadequate, failure of a pony standing before him. "Sorry, old wounds. In any case, we have morning evaluations once every three weeks, but because there's a major conference in the castle next week, Princess Luna asked that we move things up seven days so we could ensure that enough guards were continuously posted. And so, I have to coordinate with all the guard divisions, along with Luna's personal guard, and make sure everypony is on the right page. And that doesn't even include all the paperwork that'll be waiting after this. It's going to take *days* to get this all sorted out."

About halfway through Shining Armor's speech, Blueblood's eyes had dilated, while his head seemed to roll about in an attempt to dislocate itself from his body to escape the boredom. Shining gave the colt one last groan before levitating his clipboard back in front of his face. "In any case, I have a lot to do today. And seeing as how you're a little too young to take on big ponies right now, there's really no need for you to be out here this morning."

The Captain looked up from the colt and faced the crowd. "Alright, everypony, let's get settled!" The guardponies quickly stopped talking, shuffled into their usual formation of straight lines, and fired off a morning salute, which Shining Armor returned in kind. "Good morning, and welcome to our Combat Readiness Evaluations. When I call your name, I want you to march to the front. Your weapons have already been selected for you. Fight to disarm or disable. And if you have to put anypony in the infirmary, please make sure it's not for more than a day. Remember that we're here to defend the Princesses, Canterlot, and all of Equestria, and we can't do that if we pound each other into paste."

A small burst of laughter rattled through the crowd, silencing only when Shining Armor clopped his hoof down three times for attention. "Heavyweight, Razorwing, you're up first. Step forward and collect your weapons."

Two pegasi emerged from the crowd, saluted the Captain, and then stood at attention facing each other. Shining's horn lit up like a lamppost before summoning two weapons into existence. Heavyweight, a burly pony with more muscles than there was water in the ocean grabbed a floating sword, while Razorwing, a pony who Blueblood recognized from just a few days earlier, took hold of a polearm.

Shining looked back at Blueblood. "As I told you, you don't have to be here today. You could get about a half-hour head's start on your morning."

Blueblood's eyes wandered over to the nearby door. It just sat there, so inviting in its woodenness, as if it was pleading for the colt to just go back inside and get his non-hot sauced oatmeal. And besides, there was no reason for a little colt like him to smell like a sweating workhorse after a long day of dragging a rusty plow. He still had a long day of schooling, after all, and he had to be rested to learn how a dish and spoon became sentient and escaped their owners.

But on the other hand, his arch-enemy had just lost his friends, which meant he had nothing to hold him back from doing something incredibly stupid. And he had enough experience with stupid things to know that when someone did them, ponies got hurt. Usually him.

The colt nodded to himself, and then looked back up at Shining Armor. The Captain, figuring that the colt was getting ready to head back, had already returned his attention to his clipboard. The two guards continued to stare each other down, their bodies haunched downward in preparation to strike. "Actually, Shining Armor...I'd like to watch a little, if you don't mind."

The Captain's eyes rolled downward slightly, barely reflecting the sense of confusion. "Well...if you insist, but make sure you leave in time to get ready. I don't want Princess Celestia coming down here and blaming us all if you're late." He moved the clipboard to the side and locked his gaze upon the field of honor. "Gentleponies, you may commence!"

In the flash, the two warriors were upon each other. The sword swung about in Heavyweight's mouth, striking at the shaft of the halberd. In his haste to disarm his opponent, however, he failed to notice that his hold on his own weapon was slipping, and that his opponent was swinging the pole end out to catch the blow. The sword dislodged from Heavyweight's mouth on impact, and before he could even tell what was happening, Razorwing had already headbutted him hard enough to send him falling backwards, then jumped up onto his barrel and leveled the polearm at his neck.

Shining Armor's hooves slammed into the ground. "Hold! Win goes to Razorwing!"

The watching guards quickly began clopping their hooves against the ground in celebration, while Razorwing stepped off his opponent and saluted Shining Armor. Heavyweight slowly rolled over and climbed back to his hooves, his legs wobbling slightly from the sudden shift in weight. "Captain...I must protest. I don't think the fight was fair."

In an instant, all cheers, jeers, and general celebratory moods were jettisoned from the courtyard. Blueblood, remembering the cruel lessons that awaited those who dared to challenge the authority of the drillmasters, quickly retreated behind Shining Armor. The other guards, many of them still fresh-faced from the Academy, began whispering prophecies of certain doom and unbearable pain at the hooves of their commanding officer. Even Heavyweight could feel his heart sink as Shining Armor's gaze locked onto his.

“What do you mean, ‘unfair?’” he asked in as cold a tone as possible.

“What I mean...mean is...sir...” Heavyweight gulped so loudly even Princess Luna could hear the sound from the next tower over. “I was trained in how to use polearms and blunt weapons. How was I supposed to win a fight with a sword?”

Shining Armor took a few steps forward before halting a leg’s length away from his subordinate. Sensing his pony shield was leaving, Blueblood quickly retreated underneath a nearby bench for safety. The Captain’s horn lit up, calling his magic around the discarded blade before fetching it back. The sword came to a stop right between the two, its point facing upwards.

“In the line of duty, you will not always have a choice of what to fight with. You might have to break a branch from a tree, or hurl rocks at a charging manticore. I’ve seen your file, and I know you scored the highest with maces and clubs, but what if you were facing something that could only be defeated using a blade, or you had to fire at it with a bow? That’s why you have to practice with *everything*, until you are fully capable of holding back a possible threat on somepony’s life. The test *was* fair, Heavyweight. You just need to keep improving.”

The guard slowly moved a hoof up for a salute, his body shaking like he had just ingested an entire pool filled with every caffeinated beverage known to ponykind. “Y-Yes, sir.”

“Very good.” Shining Armor’s lips curled into a smile as the sword disappeared. “Now, return to formation. And I want you to get in some real practice this time, understand?”

The guard nodded, gave yet another salute, and then marched back to the formation, his eyes betraying his joy at still being alive and gainfully employed. Blueblood emerged from beneath his very limited protection, a look of surprise on his face. “Wait...what just happened? I thought...”

Shining turned his head towards the colt. “You have to be strict, but you can’t break the guys like they do in boot camp. The last Captain taught me that you get a lot better results with honey than vinegar.” He floated his clipboard back over. “Now, do you want to stick around some more? I think we can get a couple more in before it’s time for your breakfast.”

Blueblood glanced back at the crowd. He could see more than a few looking at him almost expectedly, although their actual intentions were impossible to gauge from this distance. After a few more awkward seconds of scanning, he turned back to Shining Armor. “I’d love to.”

Shining Armor nodded. “Alright, then let’s get back on schedule. Brick House, Ironhooves, step forward and prepare to be presented arms.”

Celestia sipped her morning honey, her horn searching through the various packets of mail that had arrived at the castle the preceding day. So far, she had found seventeen requests for a personal visit, twenty urgent responses from her various agents across Equestria, possibly hundreds of petitions for everything from requests to extend the nighttime by a few hours to some crazy pony wanting to invent a magical horseless carriage. And that didn't include the hundreds of pizza coupons and department store sale ads.

So busy was she that she barely noticed Princess Luna and Blueblood approach, the two entering the room from different doors at the same time. Neither pony gave more than a quiet grumble as they shuffled into their seats for the kickstart to their day, the former from her quiet frustration with managing both yesterday's daytime and nighttime courts, and the latter just disappointed that he had to leave the training grounds behind.

Nonetheless, Celestia was her usual, infuriatingly-cheerful self. "Good morning, both of you. How goes this wonderful new day?"

Luna grunted. "Mention 'fine morning' again, and I shall have your neck in a vice."

Celestia cocked an eyebrow and smiled. "Why, sister, what is the matter with you? The sun is up, the birds are singing, and Equestria is still standing. What else could you want?"

"An engineer that can actually build a stable bridge would be wonderful," Luna groaned. Celestia winced as she remembered her own report on that...incident. *Those poor ducks.*

"So..." Her gaze turned back to her young nephew. "And how about you, Blueblood? I take you watched the combat evaluations?" Blueblood responded with a simple nod of his head and very audible chew of his cud-like oatmeal. "Sooooo, any idea what your lesson will be today?"

The colt shrugged. "We're supposed to be learning the alphabet or something like that. I dunno."

Even as the breakfast table shifted back into silence, Celestia's smile never faded. She just watched as her regressed nephew and grumpy sister slowly eat their morning meal, confident that this would be another day with no regrets, upheavals, or anything else that would make the current situation any worse.

Blueblood was especially quiet and, to her surprise, actually behaving himself quite well. She hadn't seen that in a long time...

Princess Celestia did her best to remain emotionless and detached, even as her inner self was practically bouncing up and down in excitement. She simply proceeded through the rest of her

court, passing a judgment here, giving some advice there, and always waiting for the moment when she would finally be reunited with her favorite nephew.

Finally, it happened. Dusty Flint levitated up the scroll, took a deep breath, and made the official introduction. "Prince Blueblood of Equestria, enter and be received by Her Majesty , Princess Celestia."

The doors opened, allowing a single stallion to enter. Celestia's face betrayed just the slightest hint of her amazement at the radical change only a few years apart had brought. The little colt who always placed eighth-to-last in every sport was now a large, finely-muscled stallion. His messy blonde mane and tail were now perfectly groomed and shining with the glistening sheen of hair gel. His coat was perfectly straightened, with plenty of bleach and colorings to highlight his Cutie Mark. And then there were his eyes. They burned with the brashness of youth, coupled with the wisdom of a sage.

Celestia's lips twisted and quivered until she had unconsciously formed a smile. "Welcome, Prince Blueblood. I trust all is well."

Blueblood bowed, eliciting a silent chuckle from Celestia. He certainly had the routine down, but there was a definite oddness and sense of ill ease with every motion, as if he was afraid she would have him boiled in oil if it wasn't right. That attitude irritated her with her normal subjects, but seeing it in her favorite nephew never failed to bring a smile to her aged face.

After a few more moments of awkward supplicating, Blueblood stood back up. "I...Yes, everything is well. I...I'm sorry, I'm...a little flustered, to be honest. I only graduated a few days ago, and..."

Celestia smiled and shook her head. "I understand. And I apologize if I interrupted any of your plans by summoning you here so soon, but I couldn't wait to see you again. It's time you started using your education for the benefit of Equestria."

The room grew unnaturally quiet again, just like with every visitor who ever graced this throne room's doorway. It wasn't until Dusty Flint coughed that Blueblood finally dared to smile. "Yes, I...suppose that's right. And I have learned quite a bit, I promise. And...what of Princess Mi Amore Cadenza?"

Another undignified giggle tried to break through Celestia's teeth. "Princess Cadance is quite well. Right now, she's serving as our liaison to Roam. I thought it would give her some easy lessons in how to rule before she assumed more severe royal duties. Wouldn't you agree?"

The stallion's smile seemed to fade slightly, even as his lips barely registered a change in curling. He slowly nodded his head in agreement. "Of course."

The Princess looked about the room, double-checking for any hidden doorways, dukes tucked away behind curtains, or even any listening devices the nobility may have invented just to toy with her. Once she was certain that her royal dignity was protected from those who would use it against her, Celestia rose from the throne and walked over to the still-shaking Blueblood. The young stallion gasped and started to withdraw, but his aunt's calm approach gradually cooled his nerves until she was close enough to hug him. And that's exactly what she did.

"I'm so happy you're back," she whispered. "And I'm so proud of you..."

Celestia grumbled at the memories that kept trying to force their way back out. Every time she tried to stuff them back down into her subconscious, something would happen that would force them back up. She hadn't even noticed Blueblood and Luna leaving the table.

W-Well...I suppose it's for the best that happened. And besides, he's learning so much in that school now. He'll become a better pony, I'm sure of it.

"And that's why you shouldn't eat grass that hasn't been cleaned," said Miss Brightly. "And now that we know why Stone Mason won't be joining us today, let's get back to class, shall we?"

The class very quickly nodded along, both so they could resume their spelling lessons and so they could stop thinking about their classmate in agony. Snowball was still snickering at the word "diarrhea," but everypony else remained in a state of polite silence. Miss Brightly, sensing that the time for discourse had passed, erased the writing on the board and levitated up a piece of chalk. "Now, letters are actually really fun once you know how to write and spell them. This one here is a..."

Blueblood sighed and shifted back in his desk. Ribbon raised a curious eyebrow at this, but for the most part remained focused on the all-important words of her eternally wise teacher. The rest of the class was following the same procedure, eagerly making chickenscratch interpretations of each letter as Miss Brightly traced it out. The colt made the occasional scratch, if only to make sure that he didn't get in trouble, but in any case there was nothing else to do but relax.

And then he saw Orange Peel.

The orange foal simply sat there, his eyes locked intently on the little pony he had come to call his nemesis. Beneath his eyes lay a kind of madness and hatred Blueblood had only felt seven times in his life. And whenever it did come along, there were very few ponies left alive in its wake. It was the sign of a pony marking its prey for a quick, inglorious...

“Leon!”

Blueblood snapped his head back around, only to find Miss Brightly standing over him. Her lips were curled into a very disapproving stare, the kind that was usually followed up by a stern talking-to and (on occasion) a pull on the ears. “Have you listened to a word I said?”

Blueblood gulped. He could already hear the low murmurs of the foals giggling at his torment. “N-No...I mean, yes, but...”

Miss Brightly sighed and lowered herself down to the ground, stopping when she was at about eye level. “Leon, I would very much appreciate it if you would keep your attention focused on your schoolwork right now. If you want to play with your friends, you’ll have to wait until recess, okay?”

Blueblood grimaced as the chortles began. He gave a few fidgets, rolled his eyes away, and finally ended with a resigned sigh. “Yes, Miss Brightly.”

“Thank you,” Miss Brightly whispered. She rose back to her hooves, stretched out the kink in her back, and turned her gaze to the rest of the class. “Now, who’s ready for some reading?”

Shining Armor’s quill hovered from one side of the page to the other, if only to help focus his eyes on the sheer amount of information he had to process. The generals had all submitted their findings on each of the guardponies reviewed, which meant a giant stack of paperwork for each and every one of his ponies. That amounted to over eighty ponies in his division, not to mention all the others guards posted at royal estates, city outposts, and just about anywhere not directly within the castle walls.

Alas, he thought, such is the fate of the lonely Captain of the Guard. Only he stands against the ever-incroaching hordes that plot to destroy Equestria. And if he must pour over a thousand parchments by the end of the day, then so be it, for he shall...

“Um...honey? You’re in the strange area again.”

Shining Armor gave his head a healthy shake, shattering the illusions around him and returning to the real world of Equestria. In the time between his blackout and his return, Princess Cadance had made her way into his office, levitating two massive mugs of black coffee with her. Armor blushed through his fur as his magic took hold of one of the steaming cups and floated it to an empty coaster on his desk. “Th-Thanks...”

Cadance smiled and sighed. “Seriously, Shiny, I worry about you sometimes. Just please don’t

tell me this was a flashback to the Dragon's Den."

The knight quickly shook his head. Even his subconscious thoughts refused to reflect on the disaster in the Dragon's Den Tavern. All it took was one sip of Griffon's Tears, and when he came to, he had somehow shoved himself into Blueblood's mailbox. The prince was none-too-pleased when this allowed him to stop his plan to blockade Ponyville's oat shipments. "Yeah, I...I'm over that." He took a sip of the rich black liquid, the caffeine shocking his senses back into alertness. "It's just I never expected *this much* paperwork was expected of a Captain of the Guard."

Cadance rolled her head and took a seat on one of the guest cushions. "Tell me about it. You should see some of the stuff a *princess* has to sign. Refilling the cookie jar because a certain little sister just stole them all requires about a dozen requisition forms alone. And that's not to mention the cookie testers?"

Shining groaned. "Yeah, I remember. I have no idea how the Food Safety division could have ever gotten that corrupt." Another sip. "But I've got a good, full day of office duties to finish before Princess Luna comes in and asks where these are."

"Oh, I promise I won't be long," Cadance said between gulps. "You see, I've been thinking about the wedding."

Shining dabbed the quill back into the ink well a few times before drawing it back out, leaving a little trail of sticky black liquid in its wake. "Of course. Is there a problem with the caterers? The band? Please tell me the bridesmaids weren't just trying to ride on your tail?"

"Well...they were," Cadance said sheepishly, "but there is actually something else I was wondering. We haven't found a ring bearer, have we?"

"Well, I was thinking of asking Spike. We've known each other since he became Twily's assistant, and the little guy's practically part of the family by now." Shining chuckled as he looked over a guard's (very) low evaluation scores. "Seriously, Stoutheart, how can a pony so large have so much trouble lifting a dagger?"

Cadance, ignorant of her husband's continued desire to finish his impossible task, took another sip of her extra-rich coffee and leaned back on the cushion until her backlegs were threatening to start hovering. "Actually, I was thinking of giving the position to Leon."

Shining Armor's lips spat out no small amount of spittle, and it was only by the grace of Celestia that he hadn't been trying to drink more of his coffee at that point. Cadance scooted herself and the cushion back a good eight inches, just barely avoiding the string of spit. The entire room fell silent, save for the dull ticking of an old grandfather clock along the wall, until Cadance finally spoke again. "Is something wrong, Shining?"

"I-It's nothing," Shining Armor said between gags. "B-But you barely know him. He's only been living in the palace for the last couple of weeks, and..."

"But he's Blueblood's son," Cadance said. Her voice was hushed, as if afraid somepony else would hear her. "I know we decided he couldn't attend even before his banishment, but we knew nothing about his colt. I say we let him become part of the family."

Shining Armor's face became as flat as stone for a few seconds, just before his nerves chiseled the block away until it had formed into a smile. Next came the small laugh, the kind that usually accompanied either a really good joke, or somepony making a total donkey out of themselves. Cadance's eyes narrowed as she crossed her forelegs, transforming from the poised, dignified princess to something not unlike a foal who had just had her favorite toy taken away. "I wasn't joking, Shining Armor."

"I-I know," the Captain said between very un-stallionly giggles. "B-B-But the fact is, he...well..."

With a great deal of aplomb, Shining Armor cleared his throat, climbed to his hooves, and walked his way over next to his bride-to-be. The two blushed slightly as their muzzles touched, sending a wave of euphoria through both participants. It was only Shining's fear for his job and Cadance's own frustration with the whole Blueblood mess that kept things from going any farther.

"It's going to be all right," he muttered. "We can talk to Leon once he gets out of school. I'm sure he'll have all sorts of amazing things to tell you..."

"The ca-cat i-is-is...um..." The jet-black filly began to shudder as she tried to intone the words on her page.

Miss Brightly looked up from her own copy of the book and walked up to the filly. Her eyes stared at her with softness and compassion. "Try to sound the word out. What noise do you make when you freeze?"

The class responded with a simultaneous, "Brrrrrrr." Except for Blueblood, whose noise was more like a dismissive spit.

"And what do you say when something hurts you?"

Again, the class shouted back, "Ow!" Except for Blueblood; his yelp was a genuine plea on behalf of his brain.

“And what’s the last letter?”

And yet again, the foals all responded at once. “N!” Except for Blueblood, who was shouting something like, “End!”

The filly nodded, her mind still reeling from the incredibly advanced concepts presented to her. “So, the words is....Brrrrrr....ow....n?”

Miss Brightly nodded. “That’s right! Now, read the whole sentence again.”

The filly looked back at her copy and started over. “The cat is...brrrrroownna.”

“That’s wonderful, Night Sky!” the teacher exclaimed. “Keep practicing, and you’ll be able to read whole books by yourself in no time!” The filly grinned proudly; now that she had triumphed over that minor word, it was only a matter of time before she was building magic reactors and ushering in a new golden age of scientific achievement in Equestria.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the room, Blueblood just groaned. *She had trouble reading brown? What kind of... I... I mean...that really is an achievement for somepony this young, I suppose. Not that the tutors ever praised me when I did something right. J-Just think positive, don’t snap...don’t let the anger take you again...*

“Hey...you okay?” whispered Ribbon.

Blueblood nodded. “Yes...I am.”

The filly sighed in relief. “Good, ’cause it’s your turn to read.”

The colt’s eyes widened as he finally realized the *entire class* was now staring at him. Miss Brightly tapped her hooves against his hooves against the floor impatiently, already mulling over what she was going to say next if he held up class again. Sighing, Blueblood leaned over and started reading the book. “She is a good cat...”

Any possibility of continuing the discussion ended as a loud knock echoed throughout the chamber. All four eyes in the room locked on the wooden doorway the sound had echoed from just as another rattle began. Sighing, Shining Armor’s magic willed the entrance open. “Come in.”

Cadance’s eyes narrowed as the bearer of the knocking entered the room: Baron Frazzleberry. He was just as full of himself as ever, swaggering up like a proud stallion out to stud. Were her fiancé not standing at her side, she would have demanded that he leave; with him, she could

afford to humor him along just long enough to give Shining Armor a reason to toss him out. "Good morning, Princess Cadance. I had no idea you were back in Canterlot. I trust everything is well?"

"Very," she said in an icy tone. "Now what do you want, Frazzleberry?"

The Baron gasped and leaned backwards, raising a hoof to his neck as if struck by an invisible arrow. "Your Highness, I apologize. I had assumed that we were all over our petty childhood grudges."

"According to the reports I got, you attacked Lord Huffy during a dinner party." Shining grit his teeth and pushed his helmet forward slightly, making his eyes look hidden in the darkness. "It's a wonder Princess Luna didn't have you arrested, especially after you tried to assault him *right in front of her*."

"It's a wonder that..." Cadance raised an eyebrow and glanced over at her future hubby. "Wait, he did this in front of Night- Aunt Luna?"

The minute Cadance's Freudian slip reached Frazzleberry's ears, his features began to pale noticeably. His breath became as cold as a glacier, his eyes shrank to the size of peas, and his legs began to wobble like a newborn's. Shining Armor and Cadance quickly took a step back, alarmed at this sudden development. "A-Are you all right, my lord?"

"Y-Y-Yessss..." the obviously not-all-right stallion muttered. Seizing the last of his courage, he shook loose the paralyzing fear that was overtaking his senses, dulling it down until it was only a low disquiet. "My...My apologies. I've just been...well, it's a long story. In any case, perhaps you can be of assistance. I'm looking for a member of the castle staff."

Shining Armor sighed, doing his best to retain some level of civility. "Sir, is there anything we can help you with? We were in a very important meeting right now, and we would very much like to get back to business."

The Baron huffed, puffed out his chest, and blew a snort out his nostrils. "Yes, I would truly hate to interrupt your 'business.'" Both Shining and Cadance blushed as they caught the implications within his words. "However, I have my own business to attend to, and perhaps you may help. You see, my son has been attending kindergarten at one of the nearby preschools, and it seems he has become an acquaintance of a young colt. It has also come to my attention that his mother was a former employee of the now-deposed Prince Blueblood."

Cadance's eyes narrowed. "Are you really saying..."

"I was just...curious," Frazzleberry said in a bellows-like voice. "It is a very rare treat for anypony to live in Canterlot Castle, especially a pony not born into nobility. Surely somepony such as

yourself or your daring knight can see that such a situation is...unusual, and should have a third party interview the colt. How can we be sure he's not a spy or a political tool?"

Cadance was about to pick some choice words for the Baron, but stopped as Shining Armor stepped between her and Frazzleberry. "Lord Frazzleberry, when I joined the Royal Guard, I took an oath that swore to protect everypony that dwelled within Equestria's borders. If there even *is* a colt living in this castle, then his protection is my concern. If the Princesses trust him enough to allow him to live in Canterlot Castle, then I would advise you to drop your charges and give him his peace. Now, if you do not have anything to request that will *not* lead to me violating my sacred vow, then I suggest you leave, my lord, before I notify Princess Celestia of this intrusion."

Frazzleberry's jaw dropped slightly. He had known the Captain for a number of years, ever since he was but a junior officer, but he had never known him to speak in such a tone to anypony in the nobility. He never even talked up to Prince Blueblood, and *he* was a sick monster by the end. Cadance herself seemed surprised at the sudden turn; then again, his name kind of gave his dedication away. Pony names tended to do that.

The Baron nodded slowly. "Very well, then. I shall take my leave. Have a pleasant day, Captain, Your Highness."

He gave one final bow, turned about, and quickly scurried away. Once he was safely gone, Shining Armor turned back to Cadance. "Well, how'd I do?"

The mare's stunned expression slowly melted into a smile as she gave her brave knight a victory nuzzle. After all, how many knights could boldly stand in front of a noblepony and ask him to leave? "You were wonderful, muffin."

Smiling, Shining leaned in to consummate the kiss...only for Cadance to suddenly pull her head back, sending the Captain tumbling to the floor. "That's it! Muffins!"

Shining peeked up from his low vantage point, his face twisted in frustration. "What are you talking about?"

Alas, his question fell on deaf ears. Cadance quickly leaped over her downed fiancé's body and cantered through the door, muttering something under her breath that equated "muffins" with "answer." He didn't know what it was, and he was afraid to find out.

Still, he thought as he climbed back to his hooves, *it was nice while it lasted. At least it went better than the last time I tried to be brave in front of her...*

Shining Armor had barely managed to get to the front steps by the time the carriage had arrived. The other guards eyed the new Lieutenant with no small amount of contempt, as did many of the accompanying nobles. It was no small secret that he was the older brother of Princess Celestia's personal protégé, a relationship that practically put him on the fast-track to yet another early promotion. The thought bothered Shining something fierce, but if it meant he could get out of having to watch stuffy old ponies try to haul their wrinkled-up bones out of carriages, then he would cheat the system as much as it took.

The carriage slowly rolled into position. Of course, it always took the drivers and the attendants forever to unhitch themselves and begin rolling out the red carpet; as a result, Shining Armor was given a chance to scrutinize the vehicle's design and features. He may not have been very good in blacksmithing class, but even he could recognize the tell-tale features of a Roaman carriage.

Beneath his stoic, unchanging face, Shining huffed and puffed. He had known only one Roaman pony in his entire life: Princess Cadance, Twiley's old foalsitter. He could never understand why a princess would be willing to look after his LSBFF; then again, it was the easiest job in all of Equestria, seeing as the filly didn't so much as move from a spot until she had finished her latest book.

As the carriage door opened, one of the nobles broke free from the ranks and stepped closer to the unfurled carpet. The Lieutenant's eyes narrowed as he recognized the blonde-maned stallion. Prince Blueblood, one of Princess Celestia's favorite nobleponies. Ever since he had the misfortune of serving as one of his guards, he had given the noble a wide berth, and even that was rarely enough to satisfy his survival instincts. Nay, it would be better if he one day exposed Blueblood for who he was...

But that would have to wait. For now, there was another pony to guard.

One of the attendants planted his hooves next to the open carriage door and telekinetically unfurled a scroll. "May I announce the arrival of Princess Mi Amore Cadenza..."

Shining lost interest almost immediately. He had learned that the longer the title, the worse the pony, and this would no doubt be much of the same. He closed his eyes and drifted off into his half-asleep happy area, dreaming of the day he would become the Captain of the Guard after saving a princess from a thousand dragons using only a butter knife.

Still, his ears could pick up the noise. He heard a few dainty, mare-like hooves touch down on the red carpet, pause, and then slowly take a few steps forward before stopping again. There was a sound like two manepieces being rubbed together, followed by Blueblood's voice. "Welcome home, Princess Mi Amore Cadenza."

The mare giggled. "We don't need to be so formal here. Call me Cadance."

CADANCE?!

Shining Armor's eyes flung open so quickly his entire helmet almost popped off. Standing in front of Prince Blueblood was a pink winged unicorn, dressed in the usual royal horseshoes and tiara, with a blue heart as her Cutie Mark. There was no doubt that this was the same royal princess who had foalsitted Twiley. And yet...she had changed. Gone was the dorky ponytail, the chubby legs and the round little face he found so hilariously silly. In their place were the elegant curves and beautiful mane of a grown mare.

The mare slowly broke away from Blueblood, a big smile forming across her lips. She next turned to Princess Celestia, hugging her aunt and speaking something in a tongue Shining Armor couldn't understand. His matriarch slowly gave her a tiny nuzzle, the most allowed in any proper gathering such as this, and Cadance quickly returned the favor.

And then she turned to him.

Shining smiled as best he could as she approached and stopped in front of him. "Good day, Shining Armor. It has...been a long time since we last met."

Everypony's eyes, ears, and other visual and audio extremities locked onto the two in an instant. A flash of surprise spread across Blueblood's face, followed by a grim scowl. Celestia gave a quick wink to the couple. The other guards muttered hushed gossip to each other, all desperate to hear what lead to this chain of events. The other nobles appeared absolutely flabbergasted at the mere notion of a being as rare as a Winged Unicorn speaking to a common guard officer.

Nonetheless, Shining puffed out his chest and bowed to his princess. "Mi Amore Cadenza, it has been such a long time since I have last laid mine eyes upon you. You have grown into a beautiful mare, and my heart pounds at your very presence. If I were not but a mere officer, I would gladly pursue your hoof in holy matrimony, but alas, that shall never be, and I must contend myself with pining for you from afar."

Unfortunately, his idealized vision did not come to be. In reality, his remarks amounted to, "Blah eadgre fureja orjeos lahfea aaaaaaaa..." followed by a stunned silence and more than a little bit of mocking laughter from his buddies and subordinates. Cadance herself giggled at the stallion's tongue-tied response, which only served to heighten his embarrassment.

And then he saw Prince Blueblood approach, his eyes burning with rage. Before the hapless Lieutenant could even muster a word in his defense, the most hated nephew of Princess Celestia was upon him, nudging aside his cousin and snorting right into his face. "How dare you speak to Princess Mi Amore Cadenza in such a manner?!"

On any normal day, Shining would have simply stood still and taken the abuse without question.

After all, he was a member of the Royal Guard, and the orientation specifically stated that one of their duties was being forced to listen to what every born-lucky overgrown foal had to say. But now, with his nerves already pulsating from meeting Cadance again, he could not help but step back and quiver a little for fear of his life.

Fortunately for him, there was at least one pony here on his side. Cadance poked a hoof at her cousin's side, her head slightly cocked with worry. "Blueblood? He's just an old friend. We met back when I was foalsitting his little sister."

The redness in Blueblood's face lessened considerably as he turned back to his cousin. The anger gradually gave way to a general sense of confusion, followed by a general sense of relief. After a few awkward seconds, he turned back to the still-terrified Shining Armor. "Very well. Resume your post, Lieutenant, and next time, mind your tongue."

Around them, time slowly returned to normal. Cadance gave a final bow before heading back to speak with others, Blueblood trotting at her side. Once he was certain he was safe, Shining let out a deep breath and opened his eyes again...

And found himself staring at the foalsitting princess' backside.

His heart went out again.

Lofty held up the Amazing Amethyst figure, a jeweled staff shoved through the two holes in the sides of its mouth. "You won't get away with this, Ahuizotl!"

Next came Daring-Do, carried by a very excited Gusto. "That's right! We've defeated your Flying Pushups, and now there's nothing you can do to stop us!"

Ahuizotl, however, would not allow such meager ponies to foul up his schemes. With the aid of his avatar, Blueblood, he rose up in an act of sheer defiance. "You won't stop me, little ponies! By combining the Celestial Gems and the Heart of Aurora, I shall be victorious!"

Daring-Do and Amethyst both let out a roar and charged forward, their bodies slamming into the dreaded fiend. Plastic clacked against plastic as the forces of good and evil did battle, with the very fate of the universe in the balance. Ribbon, meanwhile, remained tied to the tree, mere moments away from being sacrificed to the dark powers Ahuizotl sought to control. Buttons, on the other hoof, just provided running commentary of the epic conflict.

"Daring-Do swings from the ceiling and jump bucks Ahuizotl right in the muzzle! Amethyst tries to use the change to strike from behind, but oh no! Ahuizotl's tail has smacked her across the

face! But Amethyst isn't hurt! And with Daring-Do taking the lead, there is nothing these two can't do!"

"Um...hey, guys?"

Daring and Amethyst froze mid-kick, their hind legs simply floating in the air at the sound of the familiar, and unwelcome, voice. All five slowly turned towards the nearby Snowball and Smokey, now sans their orange-coated master. The two colts kicked and pawed the ground nervously, while the mares and their token colt friend just regarded them with unwelcoming silence. The spectacle continued for what felt like a small eternity – a whole fifteen seconds – before Smokey spoke again. "So...how are you guys?"

Gusty took a few steps forward, placing herself in front of the others as best she could. "What do you want?"

"W-Well..." Snowball muttered sheepishly.

Ribbon, still tied to the tree, struggled for real against her bonds this time, and soon undid the jump rope holding her to the sacrificial tree. She climbed to her hooves, rubbing her front fetlocks as she stood. "Well, come on! We're in the middle of something here."

"A-Actually..." Snowball stammered, "we were wondering if we could...you know...hang out with you guys?"

All five's jaws popped open at the words, followed by ten eyeballs sinking back in surprise. "Wh-What?" muttered Buttons. "After everything Orange Peel did to us..."

Smokey quickly reared up, waving his forelegs frantically in front of his body before setting back down. "N-No, it's...well, you see, we..."

"Well, what do we have here?"

All seven heads spun around to the far side of the playground, to where Orange Peel was smirking. Ribbon and Buttons quickly jumped over to Lofty and Blueblood's sides, while Gusty simply trotted down towards him. Snowball and Smokey made no attempt to move, instead shifting their eyes back and forth between the two groups.

Orange Peel had barely taken more than a half-dozen steps towards the group before Gusty stepped in his path. "And just where do you think you're going?"

The colt simply sneered at the filly, not caring whether or not Miss Brightly was watching. "Get out of my way, foal. I have some business with Leon and those traitors."

Orange attempted to sidestep the filly, only for her to immediately dart back in front of him. Her determined glare only grew in intensity every time he tried to pull that move. "Now you listen! If you don't stop moving around this instant, I am going to show you just how much pain a pony can take before they go down!"

"And I'm telling you, I just want to talk to Leon!" Orange snapped back. "All I want is to say a word or two to him, and we can all leave this place without getting our flanks kicked again!"

Lofty hopped up next to Gusty, her little wings retracting upon landing. "Yeah, *your* flanks! Or did you forget what happened *last* time you tried to fight any of us? We kicked your butt! And you got us grounded!"

From behind the crowd, Blueblood watched with no small measure of surprise. *Ponies...defending me like this? I...I didn't...* He shook his head. "Um...I can..."

"I did *not* get you grounded! And besides, you deserved it for being annoying snots!" Peel's left forehoof pounded into the ground like a hammer. "Now let me-"

Ribbon was the next one up to bat, pushing herself between Gusty and Lofty and looking more confident in herself than ever. "Don't talk to my friends like that!"

"Then let me get through and I'll stop!" Orange Peel shifted away from the main body of the shield and tried to circle around the back, only to find the entire group shifting to stop him. He then turned to his left and continued the trend, moving the entire body of enemies with him. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth...

After the eighth time, Lofty finally took a step out of time, causing her legs to get caught on Ribbon, who then tripped up Gusty, and all three tumbled to the ground in a mass of limbs, horns and wings. Orange Peel followed it up by running past them, stopping just short of a still-stunned Blueblood. Buttons tried to push the colt out of the way, but tripped on a tree root and slammed into the grass.

With his allies down, there was nopony left to defend Blueblood. Orange Peel slowly approached, his eyes narrowed into tiny slits, his breath slow and forced...

"I'm going to get you, Leon."

Everything went completely still...as nothing happened. Orange Peel simply turned towards his former associates. "And you guys! Why do you want to hang around with a bunch of dorks like these dweebs? If you come back with me, then we'll forget this ever happened. There are so many other ponies we have to take down!"

The two colts, still pressed firmly against the ground, looked at each other for a few moments,

then turned back to their former friend and responded in unison. “No.”

A tiny twitch formed under Orange Peel’s right eye for a few moments before disappearing. Despite how much it hurt his muscles, he continued to force a smile. “Now come on. I’m more than willing to forget *all* about yesterday if you just come along. We can be friends like we used to be.”

“And then what?!”

Orange Peel reared up as Snowball rose back to a standing position. Within his eyes burned a sea of long-buried resentments and frustrations, all of them targeted at the hapless orange colt before him. “I’m tired of being the bad pony, okay? I helped you pick on the fillies because you used to be cool. You could jump farther off the swings than anypony, you were a pro at ‘Colt Fighter,’ and you even got us in that pool last summer! But ever since Leon got here, all you’ve cared about is him. I don’t *want* to do any of this anymore. I just want to have *fun*.”

Smokey rose up next, his limbs still shaking but otherwise still stable. “And I’m tired of getting in trouble because of *you*! I don’t know what this ‘Leon’ did to you, but he’s not worth it anymore!”

Orange Peel stood as solid as a statue, his mind unable to wrap around exactly what was happening. Around him, his former targets were returning to life, their own mouths agape at what was transpiring. “Wh-What do you mean? I...I said I’d forgive you...”

“But you never said you’re *sorry*!” Snowball took a few more steps forward, stopping just a leg’s length away from Orange Peel. “If *you* say you’re sorry, then maybe *we*’ll forgive you for costing us recess every day so you can try to get revenge!”

A chill wind blew through the playground, sending a shiver up everypony’s spine. Four fillies and three colts watched with bated breath as Orange Peel’s face scrunched up to the right, then the left, and finally to the center. His hooves trembled as he struggled to speak the next words, the ones that would decide his social future for the rest of his pre-scholastic life. His eyes teared up from the emotions burning within as he opened his mouth.

“NO! I am not sorry, and I will never *be* sorry! If you want to hang out with losers, fine! That just means I have *more* ponies I gotta beat down before I’m out of here!” He turned to the stunned fillies and Blueblood. “And you’d better watch out, too. Because once I’m done, there won’t be a single pony left in this school who won’t know the name Orange Peel!”

That was the end of the discussion. The colt galloped away, his eyes still running with clear, salty liquid. The others just watched as he left, their silence ended only when Gusty sighed. “What’s wrong?” asked Lofty.

The Unicorn’s ears flattened as she looked away sheepishly. “I don’t know. I just feel...kind of

sick to my stomach. It's like I'm..."

"You're feeling sorry for him?" asked Buttons.

Gusty quickly shook her head. "No, that's not it. That *can't* be it. I mean, he's such a jerk. Jerks don't deserve anypony feeling sorry for them."

"Y-Yes," Blueblood muttered. *Jerks don't...deserve pity.*

Celestia's quill sketched its way across the bottom of the page in but a few quick strokes, then moved straight back into the ink well, allowing Celestia to levitate the scroll to one of her nearby pages. "Deliver this to the Sanitation Department. And tell them that if I find they've been burying their trash beneath the palace again, they'll be getting more than a stern talking-to."

The page nodded and slipped away, mere moments before Cadance slipped into the room herself. Celestia smiled and nodded as her niece bowed and rose again. "Is there anything I can do for you today, niece?"

Smiling herself, Cadance took a few more steps forward. "Actually, I have a favor to ask. Do you know where I can find Sky Bloom?"

Celestia's smile twitched slightly. "W-What?"

"You know, Leon's mother? Shining Armor said she takes him to school before returning to the castle. I wanted to talk to her about picking up Leon today, perhaps take him out for a muffin or something?"

The smile vanished as Celestia cocked her head. "A muffin?"

"Well...we spoke some last night, and I was wondering if I could get another chance to speak with him today. You see, I was...wondering if he would..." She sighed. "Never mind. But I still want the chance to sit down and talk to him without an army of guards hanging outside his windows."

"Yes, sorry about those," Celestia sighed. "He tried a little daredevil stunt a while ago, and we've had to keep tabs on him ever since."

The room was silent for a few seconds, before Cadance finally spoke up again. "Well...is it all right with you or Sky Bloom?"

Celestia paused for a moment, her quill tapping against the desktop. *On the one hoof, it would*

be dangerous to have Blueblood out in public for too long. Somepony important might recognize him. On the other hoof, Cadance has some experience with this, and she should be able to take care of him for a little while.

She looked up from her work, a big smile on her face. "All right. I'll let Sky Bloom know that you'll be handling things. Just promise you won't be out too late, and please, wear your cloak."

Cadance smiled and nodded. "Of course, Aunt Celestia. And thank you so much."

The school bell rang, and all the little fillies and colts soon marched upon the streets, ready to trample yet another batch of innocent mares and stallions into paste under their little hooves. Lofty, Ribbon and Buttons quickly joined the large herd waiting to be escorted home, while a few school wagons sat waiting to be loaded. Blueblood and Gusty, meanwhile, just stood outside the gate, the former waiting for his "mother" and the latter doing much of the same. "So...your mom's still your teacher?"

Gusty nodded. "Yeah, and it stinks. I mean, I love mom, but it's a pain when she knows what your homework is."

The two returned to just kicking around dirt, at least until one of their parents came to pick them up. "So...where is your mom, anyway?"

"She has to meet with somepony's parents or something. She said I could hang out here with you until your mom or dad came, and then I have to go inside the office until she gets out."

The uneasy silence returned, with only the clops of somepony's hooves to break the silence. It wasn't until the clops got closer that the two bothered to turn around and identify their source. To their amazement, it was a mare only one had seen before; a tall, pink Unicorn with a heavy purple cloak draped over her body. Blueblood's jaw dropped in surprise, an expression that Gusty emulated with near-perfect precision. "Wh-What are you doing here?"

The mare smiled. "I'm actually picking you up today. Sorry I'm a little late, but I hadn't worn this cloak in years and I didn't realize how dirty it was." Her eyes drifted over to the filly. "Oh? And who's your little friend here?"

Blueblood gulped. He knew there was no way out of this now; his cousin would soon know one of his friends. And when this was done, she would never let him hear the end of it. "Th-This is Gusty. Gusty, this is my 'big' cousin, Cadance."

Cadance's smile grew as she nodded to the stunned foal. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Gusty. So, how did you two meet?"

“Y-Y...” Gusty’s face turned beet red as small noises echoed through her throat and bounced about through the immediate area. Both Blueblood and Cadance leaned over in confusion and worry as she grew even redder. “Y-Y-Y...”

“Is something wrong?” asked Cadance.

“YOU’RE GIGANTIC! ENORMOUS!”

Cadance and Blueblood both reared back, the former almost revealing her wings in the process. The filly, however, looked like she had seen a monster. “I-I didn’t know Leon was related to *giants!*”

Cadance slowly sank back onto her haunches, nervously tapping her forehooves together. The filly refused to move from her spot, probably in case the giant was a foal-eater like Nightmare Moon. “W-Well...I guess I *am* a bit bigger than most mares.”

The entire scene grew silent yet again, save for Gusty’s labored breathing, the tiny trickling of tears from Cadance’s eyes, and the stunned gawking coming from Blueblood’s jaw. A chilly wind blew through the streets, clanging shutters and rustling chimes. Even the very sky seemed to darken slightly, as if some great force was pushing down from the very heavens to blanket the world.

Finally, having had time to calm down, Gusty fell back on her haunches. “I-I’m sorry. I’ve just never seen a mare as tall as you before. You’re, like, princess-sized.”

Cadance wiped the droplets from her eyes, climbed back to her hooves, and walked over to the nervous filly. “There, there. It’s all right. You were right, after all. Just...don’t say things like that from now on, okay? You might hurt somepony’s feelings.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” the filly sighed. “I’m sorry.” She turned to Blueblood, the colt just barely managing to regain his senses. “And I’m sorry, too. I’ve just...never seen a mare that big before.”

Blueblood sighed and walked over to Cadance. “Well, you’re right. She is *big*. But she’s also really cool!” he said with the largest amount of sarcasm he could muster. “So, should we be getting home before mom gets worried?”

Cadance nodded. “Actually, we have one stop to make. But yes, we really should be going before it gets late.”

The added stop made Blueblood a little nervous, but nonetheless, he waved farewell to Gusty and followed his now-older cousin down the street...

The bakery was, to put it simply, *old*. While some of the wooden support beams, counters, and tables were obviously shiny and new, the entire outside of the structure screamed of a building several hundred of years in age. By the time Cadance and Blueblood arrived, the place was about half-full, mostly with students from the Canterlot Magic University enjoying a muffin break. Fortunately, there was a table seated far in the back, where nopony would notice them.

Cadance pointed at the chair facing the counter. "You can sit here, Leon. You want some hot chocolate?" Blueblood nodded, his mind still confused by all these events. Cadance smiled, adjusted her cloak, and walked up to the counter.

Blueblood, once again alone with his thoughts, glanced looked around the small bakery. Sure enough, it was...a bakery. Very...bready, with every panel, chair, table, and floorboard radiating carbohydrates. It was a far cry from the kitchens in his former home, where the best bakers willing to work on the cheap produced the best bread possible in a perfectly clean kitchen. Here, everything was cramped, wooden, and more than a little irritating to his royal sensibilities.

His chair also faced the back kitchens. There, a hoofful of ponies, including a vaguely familiar stallion, were busy rolling dough, twisting and salting pretzels, patting in the yeast, and finally shoving their soon-to-be creations into a massive oven to finish their formation. When the bread was baked, an Earth pony mare lifted the new products from the back to the main counter, where some were sold immediately and others were placed on the shelves and in the display cases to attract more customers.

Yes, this was just any normal, peasant bakery...save for the blue filly that had just stepped through a back door next to a pair of stairs leading up to what Blueblood assumed to be a living area. She had made it up about two steps by the time she realized she was being watched. Her beady little eyes slowly scanned across the entire bakery, passing over the various ponies before finally centering in and arming friendship missiles on the little white colt in the far corner.

Blueblood's eyes widened as he finally pegged down the face rushing towards him like a mad bull. "R-Rib-"

"LEON!"

The filly leaped from the floor, slamming Blueblood in a flying tackle maneuver worthy of any professional wrestler. The impact was so great that both of the foals and the stool Blueblood had been seated on went flying to the floor. The little ponies bounced twice before finally stopping next to the wall. "Oh wow, this is so cool! I didn't know you liked bread!"

Blueblood let out a deep breath, which wasn't hard considering a filly was currently pressing her

hooves down on his lungs. "H-Hello, Ribbon," he coughed. "I-It is...amazing to...see you here...today and..."

"Oh my goodness, are you two okay?"

The two looked up at the big pink pony standing over them, mere moments before she finished levitating over some hot chocolates and muffins to the table. Blueblood's face darkened with sheer humiliation, while Ribbon simply stared at the mare in shock. "W-We're fine, Cadance," Blueblood coughed.

The "Unicorn" sighed with relief. "Thank goodness." Her eyes turn to the filly standing next to him. "And who's your little friend, Leon?"

Ribbon, in her stunned state, relaxed her hoof just enough for Blueblood to roll free and climb back up onto his stool. At the very least, it gave him something of a height boost. "This is Ribbon, one of my classmates. Ribbon, this is my cousin, Cadance."

The blue filly smiled and nodded awkwardly, her eyes locked on the protruding bone in Cadance's forehead. The mare raised an eye at the foal's misplaced attention, then quietly yelped as she realized what her eyes were pointed on. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Are you...interested in my horn?"

"I-I've never seen a Unicorn with a horn that large," Ribbon muttered. "What I heard is that if a Unicorn has a large horn, it means they have a lot of magical ability. You must really be a great sorcerer."

Cadance blushed and shied away, doing her best not to flash her wings. Blueblood just sighed in relief and sipped down a little of his hot chocolate. *I can't say she's wrong. My cousin's genetics do give her a rather large amount of capability. She's certainly better at magic than I ever was.*

His eyes suddenly widened, mere moments from his hoof reaching his muffin. *Wait...that thing about horns... It wasn't about magic, it was about...*

"And you must have great virility!"

Everything in the bakery became as still as the grave. Every single pony in attendance stared at the sight with slacked jaws, sunken eyes, and gurgles that signified everything from "amusement" to "horror." Cadance herself had to fall back on her haunches, her eyes locked on the now-ruined point on her head. Blueblood simply sank beneath the table, doing his best to impersonate a prairie dog.

The kitchen doors opened, allowing Sourdough to march out onto the store floor. Ribbon flashed

a warm smile to her mother, only for it to cool into a frown as she saw the scowl in place.
“Um...is something wrong, mom?”

“Young lady, is that how we talk?” Sourdough’s voice was low and hushed, sending shivers up the backbones of everypony in the room.

“B-But...it’s what I heard!” Ribbon moaned. “One of the big ponies in my study group said that...”

“I-It’s quite all right,” Cadance mumbled, her eyes closed to keep the sweat on her brow from burning her retinas. “She didn’t know what she was saying. I promise, I’m not...”

Sourdough slowly lowered her head until she and her daughter were muzzle-to-muzzle. “You know, one of the bedrooms is quite the pigsty. I think a certain little filly needs to march her flank upstairs and start cleaning.”

“B-But...” Ribbon’s shot a hoof in Blueblood’s direction. “L-Leon’s...”

Sourdough looked up at the colt. He could already feel his will to live shrivel into a dried raisin before blowing away like dust in the wind. “W-Well...I...I just...”

“If you wanted to spend time with your friend, you should have thought about what you were saying.” Sourdough pointed a hoof at the far staircase, her eyes now burning with parental anger. “Now, you march up those stairs and have your room cleaned. Otherwise, you can forget about dinner.”

Small tears began to form in Ribbon’s eyes. “B-But...”

All this earned her was a downward smash of her hoof. “No ‘buts,’ missy!”

Ribbon sniffled and pouted, but finally gave in to her mother’s wishes and began the long, hard trot up the stairs. Sourdough’s eyes traced her every step, locking on the steps until her daughter was well out of view. Once she heard a door close, she finally allowed her face to reset to a less sour expression. “My apologies, everypony. When I find out who taught her such language...”

Cadance chuckled nervously. “W-Well...I guess we should be going...”

“W-WAIT!” Sourdough’s eyes snapped wide open as her customer service skills kicked into gear. She dashed behind the counter, ducked out of sight for a few seconds, and then returned with half-a-dozen muffins on a metal tin. After setting the dish on the table, she turned to face the two customers. “I am sorry you were inconvenienced, so please, accept these on the house.”

The pink mare regarded the pastry treats before her with no small measure of disquiet. On the one hoof, they were free muffins. On the other hoof, she hadn't done anything to earn them, and it would be a bad example for Leon to follow if she just started gorging on things she hadn't paid for. Sighing, she turned to face Sourdough. "I thank you very much for your hospitality, but I am afraid we really should be..."

"Phfey! Fi'm eafin' fhear!"

Cadance and Sourdough both turned to Blueblood. The colt had finished his own muffin by this point, and was already almost finished with his second from the platter's selection. A series of brief reprimands etched their way through Cadance's mind, but in the end, she had no choice but to shrug, sit down, and start munching herself. Sourdough smiled at yet another satisfied customer before returning to the back to check on the next round of dinner rolls.

A content smile spread across Blueblood's lips as he chowed down on his meal. *This may not be the right thing to do, and Ribbon might be in trouble, but...I am NOT turning down free muffins!*

By the time the two had left the bakery, their bellies were practically bulging from all the sweet breads they had just ingested. Every step felt like they were wearing full plate over a floor made of magnets. "By Celestia, I've never eaten so many muffins at once in my life!"

"Tell me about it," Blueblood said between burps.

Cadance giggled at her "cousin's" flatulence before stopping at a nearby lamppost, her legs far too exhausted to carry her anymore without rest. "Actually, I had another reason to bring you out here. You see, I've been thinking about..."

"Excuse us, but we need some help."

The two stopped as a cadre of burly stallions emerged from the shadows. Despite their well-pressed suits and expertly-combed manes, it was obvious from their scars and missing eyeballs that these weren't the friendly ponies one would normally encounter on the streets of Canterlot. Cadance regarded the scene with no small measure of anxiety, but Blueblood's own fear was much worse. Not only could he see the switchblades hidden in their horseshoes, but he could recognize more than a few of their attackers. These were some of the hired muscle the nobility would bring aboard to intimidate their targets.

Despite her obvious fear, Cadance cleared her throat and tried to sound brave. "Yes? How can I help you?"

"We're looking for somepony," said one of the goons. "And I think the little colt here is the one."

Cadance feigned gasping as she dragged Blueblood closer. All this did, however, was get a few to switch open their weapons. "Please don't make this any harder than it has to be. Our employer has already sent a carriage for you, and it took us a long time to find where you went. We're already late for our meeting, so please come quietly..."

"And just who is this 'employer?'" Cadance asked.

The stallion's looked about each other, grunted out a few noise phrases, and then turned back to Cadance. "Oh, I believe you know who, *Princess*."

From the clouds above the street, a lone Pegasus watched as Cadance and Blueblood were loaded into a black carriage, which then sped off down the city's back streets before heading towards the roads leading to the outer estates. He quickly motioned to the others behind him, who then fanned out to follow the vehicle...

Luna struck out yet another line from her latest royal proclamation, set her quill aside, and re-read the edited section. "Literacy amongst our younger foals is one of the most important problems facing us as a nation today. A thousand years ago, reading was for the wealthy and nobility. And while it makes me proud to know that our new public school system is teaching our little ponies to appreciate literature, I have found some of the material questionable. Our foals need to learn proper lessons through reading, and stories about talking weevils are hardly..."

A loud knock reverberated through the chamber, its source being the bedroom door. Luna waited a moment for her hearing to return before answering. "Please, come in."

A golden, pulsating aura surrounded one half of the door briefly before pushing it open, allowing its master, Celestia, the opportunity to enter this forbidden chamber of darkness and despair before dissipating entirely. The younger sister looked up from her desk and smile as her older sibling approached. "Good afternoon, sister. What brings you here?"

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you about..." Celestia's eyes slowly wandered over to the parchment. "What are you working on?"

Luna's face beamed with pride as her horn carefully slid the parchment out of view. "Oh...nothing of importance."

Celestia cocked an eyebrow, her lips curling downwards into a disapproving frown. She knew exactly what Luna was doing. It was the same self-styled crusade she had set out upon ever since her hospital visit. "I see. Well, in any case, I was wondering if you knew where Cadance and Blueblood were."

"I thought that servant of yours, Sky Bloom, handled our little prisoner?" asked Luna.

Celestia sighed. "Normally, she would have, but Cadance was insistent on picking him up from school today. She said she wanted to take him to a local bakery for a muffin, but they should have been back by now. I've already sent out several guard patrols to look for her, but she never even said which bakery it was, just that it was in the Old Quarter."

Luna groaned. Nearly half of the Old Quarter was bakeries, leftover businesses from the Great Donut Boom of 954 CE, and while she wasn't present due to being reduced to an incorporeal state inside of the moon, she knew more than enough about how much destruction it caused. No pony ever looked at a bearclaw the same way again. "Do you think Cadance would have done anything?"

"I don't know," Celestia muttered. "I...I just don't know anything anymore." The Sun Alicorn sighed and began pacing around the room, irritating the still-busy Luna to no end. "We should have told her the truth from the beginning. I wanted to tell her everything yesterday, but...she seemed to know so much already, and...I've already..."

Luna turned her chair about until she was facing Celestia. "It's fine, sister. I'm certain they are all right. Blueblood may be a fool, but he wouldn't allow Cadance to take him to anywhere he might be in danger. And I think we can trust her as well. After all, you did raise her."

Celestia's lips curled into a sneer. "Don't remind me. I still can't believe those parents of hers. They honestly thought that stupid tradition was more important than their own daughter? I was lucky to get them to let her visit more than once every five years. At least Blueblood's parents cared a little for him before they turned him into...**that**."

Luna cocked her head and climbed back to her hooves. She slowly trotted her to her sister and rested her head on her back in a small pony hug. Celestia shivered slightly from the sudden contact, but it still served its intended purpose; the elder sister's nerves cooled back to their normal temperatures. She exhaled a deep breath and sighed. "I'm sorry. Some...bad memories have been resurfacing the last few weeks. I never should have gone back into that cave."

"No, you shouldn't have." Luna giggled. "But hey, you got some cake out of it. Sure beats cave moss."

Celestia pulled herself back a step, barely suppressing a similar gaggle of giggles. "Well, I can't argue with that assessment. Still, the sooner this is all done, the better I'll feel. I'm sure they'll be

home any minute..."

Needless to say, the mere sight of the Frazzleberry estate was more than enough to send chills running down the length of Blueblood's spine. The massive manor house was older than even Blueblood's ancestral home, having been built and maintained ever since the third century of Celestia's solo reign. The grounds were decorated with perfectly-trimmed rose bushes, magnificent statues of Celestia and the foremost ancestors of the current Frazzleberry generation, and like all good Canterlot homes, a plastic pink flamingo. No pony knew why, but ever since Celestia put one in a remote area of the castle grounds, everypony else had to follow suit, lest they be seen as denouncing their ruler's taste in fashion.

The carriage slowly pulled to a stop in front of a massive stone fountain. Four intricately-carved koi fish sat upon the fountain's edge, ejecting water from their mouths into a central pool in the center. Meanwhile, standing on a pedestal in the center of the whole mess was a small Unicorn cherub, a gleaming sword held skywards in his mouth. Blueblood shuddered as he recognized the inspiration for this decoration. "The Legend of Celestia's Seraphim Knight" was certainly well-known amongst the horned members of Canterlot's elite; the story of a small Unicorn helping Celestia defeat the barbaric lesser races was an ancient story, used to promote Unicorn supremacy amongst ponykind.

Even at his worst, though, Blueblood didn't buy it. For one thing, a foal would not be able to swing a broadsword. That, and the whole bacon episode in the later sagas was rather bizarre.

Blueblood and Cadance heard the riders out front unhitch themselves, followed by heavy hoofsteps against cobblestone. The doors suddenly opened, revealing two of the burliest stallions either had ever set their eyes upon. Before they could say anything, the ones inside the ride pushed their passengers out, the two landing in the cold, iron-shoed hooves of the bigger ones.

"Now, please be careful. These are our guests, after all."

Blueblood's blood ran cold as he heard the voice. He may have been less than half his former height, but he could recognize such a harsh, evil tone anywhere. Slowly, he lifted his head just enough to make out the features of Baron Frazzleberry. And standing to his right was none other than Orange Peel. "Looks like you got them, dad!"

Blueblood's mouth dropped. "DAD?!"

Cadance's brow furrowed with rage. "Frazzleberry, what is the meaning of this?"

The Baron tsked the two, while his son's maniacal grin only grew. "Princess Cadenza, I do not

wish you any harm. I just wish to have a nice, pleasant chat with one of my son's classmates. I apologize for getting you involved as well, but I suppose I should kill two birds with one stone."

He clapped his hoof against the ground. "Take them into the west parlor. Make sure that their every need is attended to, short of their freedom." He looked down at his eager son. "And please get Orange Peel his favorite drink. This shall be a long night."

The Pegasus reached his position just as the door closed. It may have been getting dark, but anypony who had ever served in the Royal Guard knew their way around dark places. Perched on a nearby cloud, he could make out some of the activity inside, but not where the Princess and Blueblood had gone to once inside.

Sighing, he flew down from his position and landed next to a waiting Shining Armor. "They're inside, sir. I don't know what's going on."

The Captain sighed. "I understand. You tell the rest of our ponies to stay back; we don't want anything to happen to either pony. I'll notify the Princesses and give them the update."

The Pegasus snapped up a salute, spun on his hooves, and took off towards the horizon. Once he was gone, Shining's horn began to emit a low glow...

Frazzleberry took another sip of brandy, his eyes fixed on his son and two guests. Orange Peel quietly sucked his juice box down, his triumphant grin never leaving his face even in the face of lima bean-flavored punch. Cadance and Blueblood remained without any kind of liquid, the latter simply subsiding on the massive candy dish full of cone-shaped chocolates, hard-shelled candies, and candy-coated almonds. The electric lights were all off, leaving only the menacing roar of the fireplace to provide light of any kind. Six bodyguards and a hooffull servants watched the group in quiet contemplation, their silhouetted forms growing and shrinking with each flicker of the flame.

Blueblood rolled his eyes at the stillness in the air, even as his cheeks were puffed like a chipmunk from all the comfort treats. The whole setting was typical of those in the nobility. Whenever they needed to address an enemy, or make themselves look more important to a potential ally, they would always dress up their appointments in this kind of gaudy, dark, and unwelcoming atmosphere. Supposedly, it made them look more intimidating, like they were capable of bringing the sky down upon anypony who dared to offend them in some manner.

Of course, the illusion was broken by the orange foal, but no pony bothered to bring it up. Knowing that he was just looking silly right now would have only served to hurt Frazzleberry's

feelings, after all.

The Baron took another sip before addressing the foal. "I assume you know why I brought you here?" Blueblood's response was a non-indicative shrug. The stallion smiled, took a deeper sip, and floated the glass back to the nearby table before tapping his forehooves together. "It has come to my understanding that you and my son have been attending the same school the past week or so. In that time, I have received two messages informing me of his misbehavior and a parent-teacher conference."

Cadance glanced over at the still-smug colt. Her eyes briefly flashed with a cool anger before returning to their normal expression. "But what does Leon have to do with any of that?"

The stallion smirked. "I have known of my son's behavioral problems for some time, but it appears that every time an incident occurred, Leon and his friends were involved in some way. And I certainly know of his heritage. Or does he look exactly like a young Prince Blueblood purely by accident?"

Blueblood's eyes exploded in horror. His body convulsed so quickly from the shock that he almost got an almond stuck in his throat. *Wait...he knows? He...How...Huh?*

Orange Peel snorted at the sight of Blueblood's displeasure, stopping only when his sudden outburst earned him a very stern look from his father. Cadance scooped out a candy and tossed it down her throat, her eyes fixed squarely on the stallion. "Baron Frazzleberry, if you are insinuating that..."

The sifter floated back to the Baron's lips. He took a big gulp of the brown liquid down before setting it aside, leaving only a tiny puddle of liquid buried beneath four half-melted ice cubes. The stallion coughed for a few seconds as the fire water burned from the inside, then continued. "Princess Cadance, I mean no disrespect to you. However, there is a very important matter that Leon and I must discuss. He has to know where his parentage has landed him."

"He already knows his father was banished!" Cadance snapped. "What more does he need to..."

Something prodded the mare in the wings. Her eyes followed the source of the impact to Blueblood; the colt was now staring at her in a manner not unlike a puppy begging for a treat. "It's fine," he said. "I want to hear this."

The stallion scoffed. "I must admit, for such a young foal, he had a remarkable level of maturity. Must get it from his mother, whoever she is."

Orange coughed out his straw and started laughing like a hyena. "Yeah, how's it feel to be a bas-"

The curse died down as Frazzleberry leaped from his chair, his hooves slamming down hard enough to rattle a few trinkets. Nonetheless, that much force was enough to put the fear of Celestia into his son; he quickly began to crawl backwards on his hindquarters, which was no small feat considering pony physiology. "I thought I had told you to never use such language!"

"B-But...that's what he..." The colt's last few words fused together into a single, whining blob of meaningless drivel.

The stallion clapped his hooves together, causing one of the servants to leave the darkness and approach. "Take my son to the washroom. Make sure his mouth is properly cleaned this time."

The servant quickly bowed grabbed the colt by his back, and slowly left the room, the foal thrashing and screaming in outrage and fear every step of the way. Blueblood and Cadance simply watched the spectacle from their seats, both secretly glad that nopony ever shoved soap down their throats whenever they used vulgar language.

"My apologies," Frazzleberry muttered as he sank back into his chair. "My son has been very temperamental for quite a while. I honestly don't know what has gotten into him, but ever since that one filly talked to him, he's been acting like a delinquent."

"I...see..." Cadance muttered. She looked back down at the candies Blueblood was packing away. "But still, why are you doing all this?"

"Because we have a score to settle."

Before Cadance could react, an energy field enveloped her body and floated her up into the air. Blueblood jumped to his hooves in a panic as Cadance's hooves locked onto the top of a nearby chair, only to have herself be pulled away again by a second burst of magic. Next came a third, then a fourth, and finally two more. Behind her, the six bodyguards' horns were glowing like candles during Hearth's Warming Eve, their power focused on holding the (theoretically) most powerful pony in the room in one spot.

Frazzleberry slung his glass up and finished his drink, his mood darkening with every gulp. He then tossed the glass into the fire; the last few drops of alcohol created a small rush of fire as the container shattered. "And that's why I brought you here. It's time we settled the matter of your house once and for all."

Cadance struggled to break free, but the combined power of six stallions was strong enough to keep her pinned down. Blueblood similarly tried to back away, but his poor positioning from earlier had left him directly against the couch. Even then, his overwhelming sense of dread was more than enough to overwhelm his brain's attempts at promoting escape.

The Baron loomed overhead. His eyes threatened to burn a hole straight through the colt's skull, while his hooves promised lots and lots of stomping. "Leon, son of Prince Blueblood..."

Blueblood cowered. Cadance gasped and tried to muster one last burst of Love Magic, but the spell couldn't be weaved in time. Everything seemed to move in slow-motion as Baron Frazzleberry, third-greatest enemy of Prince Blueblood, towered over his helpless "son," took one step back...

And then bowed down. "I wish to apologize for my son's actions. And my own."

Blueblood's eyes popped open. "Huh?"

Cadance's eye twitched. "What?"

Every servant and bodyguard gasped and whispered amongst each other, their minds unable to discern exactly what had just happened. A frown spread across the Baron's face as he stood back up, his horn lighting up in the process. A small aura appeared over a distant switch for a few seconds before flipping it up, turning on all the overhead lights. Now that everypony could see each other more clearly, Frazzleberry trotted back to the fireplace and leaned against the wall. "I suppose I should explain myself more."

"That...would be very helpful," Cadance said as she walked past, stopping only when she reached Blueblood's side.

Frazzleberry loudly cleared his throat, adjusted his suit, and then continued. "As I said, our houses have been at war for a very long time. Ever since Blueblood's family chose to aid House Huffy, the head of every generation of Frazzleberry has sworn to bring down those who opposed us. Even after Huffy's sudden but inevitable betrayal, your house was still a constant reminder of how close we came to falling."

Cadance rolled her eyes at the whole mess. She had tried her best to avoid getting involved in any of the house wars, especially since having a Winged Unicorn on someone's side could tip the balance of power once and for all. That and most of them were, according to her younger self, "Stupid meanies that deserved to be ran into the Coliseum and fed to the lions."

Blueblood, however, remained transfixed on Baron Frazzleberry. Now that he was no longer in danger of being crushed like a grape, the scene around him finally had time to filter through his brain a bit better. All that did was make him more confused. "Then...if you hated my dad so much, why are you being so nice to me?"

Frazzleberry let out a deep sigh before rolling his head up. "Ah yes, your father was certainly a lout. He was a spoiled, self-centered, pompous, loudmouthed, small-minded, arrogant, holier-than-thou stallion who more than deserved to have his..." His jaw closed with an audible

snap, stayed that way for several seconds, and then reopened. "My apologies. I...am not used to the company of strange foals. My son never brought his friends over."

His horn lit up, a magic field soon pulling up a nearby pipe stuffed with corn kernels. Another burst of magic, and a match had lit the kernels. The stallion took a puff, sending out a burst of popcorn like miniature fireworks. Blueblood rolled his eyes at the familiar novelty item. *Poppers. I never could stand those things.*

"You see, my boy, your father was awful. But in a way, so was I." Another puff, another burst of butter-free goodness. "Ever since I was a colt, I dreamed of the day I would finally destroy Lord Huffy and bring down his pathetic house. Every month, we dueled during the monthly dinner at the palace. Celestia was always busy, we thought, but she never said anything against it, so it seemed fine. We both got some scraps in, and I believe your father once tried to join before Huffy took him out with a baguette. But the last one..."

Blueblood and Cadance's eyes both shot wide open. Neither one had been at the event, thanks to Blueblood being under house arrest and Cadance in Stalliongrad, but they had both heard tales of that blood-curling night. Frazzleberry's entire coat paled as he took several desperate puffs on his pipe, shooting off popcorn like a movie theater machine. "I...misjudged Princess Luna. Whenever I heard her name, I could only think of those old legends about a monster that eats foals one night a year. So when she intervened in my destined duel, I...called her what I thought she was."

Cadance sighed. "You called her Nightmare Moon, didn't you?"

The entire room fell completely silent, save for the crackling of the fire and the hum of the electric lights. Frazzleberry slowly walked back to his chair and flung himself onto its cushiony surface. "Yes, I did. I called her many things that night, and none of them good. She returned the favor by exposing us all as we truly were: a decadent cabal of backstabbers and social climbers, with nothing to do but humiliate Princess Celestia with our mere existence."

"I...heard something happened," Blueblood said quietly, "but I never knew what it was exactly."

Frazzleberry sighed. "Ever since then, many of us have been examining our lives, trying to find some way to make up for generations of misconduct and abuse. Raisinette, for example, has stopped using slander and lies in her advertising. And as we speak, Lord Huffy and I are in negotiations to settle our families' dispute. But with your father's banishment, I was unable to fully close off that part of my old life. Fortunately, with you here, perhaps we can come to some kind of agreement."

Blueblood cocked his head. "Huh?"

"What I am asking for is your forgiveness." Frazzleberry clapped his hooves together,

summoning a nearby servant to bring him a new glass of alcohol. He took a few sips, and then set the glass back down to pop some more corn. "You are only heir to Blueblood's that we know of, and were it not for blind fortune, I would have not known of your existence. And that's why I had you brought here, so you would know that the Frazzleberry line will no longer bear your family any harm."

"Then why all the kidnapping?" asked Cadance. "You could have just, you know, *asked nicely*?"

Frazzleberries face remained unchanged for several seconds, as if his brain was having trouble processing what he had just heard. Finally, the surges hit just the right pattern, and he turned to the Princess with eyes wide open. "Wait...that was an option?"

The mare groaned. "What do you mean? Of course that was always an option!"

"I just...I was just told this was how *all* meetings should go. It was how I scared away the Cider Ponies, purchased the land rights to that zebra tribe's village, and got that loan for a new yacht out of Manehattan harbor." Frazzleberry sighed. "Yet another teaching of our ancestors that doesn't apply anymore."

Blueblood shrugged. "Trust me, I know."

The three finally shared a small laugh, which gradually evolved into a full-on, frustrated, uncomfortable chuckle. Cadance was still angry at what had happened, Frazzleberry knew he was doomed once Celestia had learned what he had done, and Blueblood was more than a little nervous about what awaited him in the future, but for now at least, the danger was all behind them...

From atop a dark cloud, a pair of large, winged figures watched an old carriage work its way through the country roads and back towards the city streets. The guards were already galloping away, save for a few Pegasi assigned to keep an eye on the estate grounds. Once Frazzleberry had gone inside, the leftmost figure breathed a sigh of relief. "I suppose that is the end of this madness."

The other shook her head. "No, not by a long shot. I believe we should be making our way back to the castle before they arrive. There is much more we need to prepare."

By the time Frazzleberry had reached his son's perfectly-kept bedroom, the last few suds were still on the sides of the little colt's mouth. "You didn't have to do that, dad."

"Then you shouldn't have spoken in such a manner," Frazzleberry replied coldly. "You are my son, and I expect much better behavior of you than what I saw tonight."

The colt simply shrugged and jumped onto his bed. "So, they're all gone now? You scared that stupid Leon away forever? I won't have to see his stupid mug in school again?"

Frazzleberry shook his head as he entered the bedroom. Orange Peel scooted back slightly, if only to protect his rear from a belt, but upon seeing no such instrument sighed in mistimed relief. "My son, the war between the Frazzleberries and the Bluebloods is now over. I thank you for bringing him to my attention, but now I must ask you not to attack him again."

All the bravado and joy in Orange Peel's eyes disappeared in an instant. The colt jumped down from his bed and charged up to his father, his eyes livid with anger. "Wh-What do you mean? He's a stupid little dork! What, do I have to act like he's a prince or something? Are you trying to ruin school for me?!"

For all his son's shouting and whining, Frazzleberry's face never changed. He just looked his son dead in the eyes and blew another batch of popcorn from his pipe. "Actually, I don't think you'll be having that problem for much longer..."

The first half of the carriage-ride back was wreathed in an awkward, bewildered silence. Cadance and Blueblood simply stared out the window as the cart left the estate grounds and began circling the streets of Canterlot. The sun was barely visible in the horizon, leaving the entire city wreathed in a dull, shadowy pall for the twilight hour. The streets were almost completely deserted, with only a few straggling ponies hurrying to finish their daily tasks before nightfall.

It wasn't until the carriage pulled the corner that Cadance spoke. "I...really didn't expect that."

"Neither did I," said Blueblood. "Frazzleberry was- I mean, I was told he hated my dad, but...why didn't he do anything?"

Cadance tapped a hoof against the carriage's foreleg rest. "I heard something happened while I was gone. Apparently, something happened at the monthly dinner party, and Aunt Luna lost her temper. Perhaps he's still scared of what she'll do if he tried to hurt you."

Blueblood nodded. "Yes, that...sounds right. Princess Luna can be very scary, after all."

The two exchanged a nervous laugh, now bonding over their shared despair over what Princess Celestia would do once they got back to the castle. If Frazzleberry wasn't immediately executed, banished, or executed and then banished, he would still be facing certain punishment for the

kidnapping. And then there was one other issue digging at Blueblood's mind.

Does everypony know about this now?

"And that's what happened," Cadance finished.

Celestia let out a mournful sigh as she circled the three for the fiftieth time in the last twenty minutes. Cadance huddled next to Shining Armor, while Blueblood remained between the two of them. If one didn't know better, they could have assumed they were already a happy couple with a bouncing little colt of their own. In any case, it would be a miracle if they could get that far at this rate.

The pacing finally ceased as Celestia stepped onto her royal throw rug. "So, this is the result of Luna's little outburst? Kidnapping princesses like something from a foal's bedtime story?"

Shining Armor took a small step forward. "Princess, Cadance and Leon haven't been hurt, and as far as we can tell Baron Frazzleberry had no intention of putting either into danger."

Celestia shook her head. "No, this is...this is serious. We will have to discuss this more thoroughly in the morning. In the meantime, I want a full watch on Frazzleberry's estate. No pony goes in or out without either myself or Luna knowing." Her eyes turned to Cadance and Blueblood. "And as for you two...I'd recommend going to bed. It's been a long night for all of us."

"Cadance, I...I don't think this is necessary."

Blueblood struggled against the iron-clad confines of his bedsheets. No matter how hard he squirmed or shimmied, nothing could break free. His cousin, however, just laughed at his absolute misery. "Oh come on, Leon. Don't tell me no pony's ever tucked you in before."

"N-Not in a while," the colt coughed back. "But I'm fine. I don't need anypony to do this. I can get to sleep on my own."

Cadance sighed, a smile still fresh on her lips. "So I guess a bedtime story and lullaby are out of the question?"

For the love of Celestia, YES! "I'll be fine."

With one last little giggle for the road, Cadance rose from her sitting position and patted the colt on the forehead. Blueblood winced from the sudden contact, especially as her hoof touched the

very sensitive skin around his horn. "Well, I guess it's time for little princes to get some sleep."

And then it happened.

The single moment that destroyed Blueblood's very sense of identity and self in one swift motion.

Princess Cadance leaned over and gave him a quick goodnight kiss on the side of his forehead.

By the time Blueblood was capable of pony speech again, his cousin had already left the room. He muttered something unintelligible even to him under his breath, rubbed his face in a desperate attempt to clean away the disgust, but there was no way to scrub his brain. All he could do was sob into his pillow and try to drum up some memory to hate her by...

Blueblood leaned back in his massive recliner, taking in that new-chair smell that he loved so much. His parents, now that they had retired to private life in Manehattan's social circles, had been nice enough to allow him to take his inheritance early and become the owner of many of their former lands. This was a definite advantage over those who had to downsize after their parents blew away their legacy on dice and foal's card games. He had no time for such frivolities, of course. He was a prince, and a prince had a duty to his country.

And he had much to do. It had been but a year since his return, and he had seen more than enough to know that his parents were right. Princess Celestia truly had let the country slip too far, and it was his responsibility to bring it back. No matter what, Equestria would prosper.

"Excuse us, sire, but we have something for you."

Blueblood broke from his inner thoughts at the sound of the green mare's voice. She was dressed in the same maid's outfit his father had imposed on them in the past, but it was obvious from the way she carried herself that she was no mere servant. Still, he had to treat the lower classes with at least a little bit of respect; that is, as long as they were useful. "I take it you're with the detective agency?"

"Of course," said the mare. "I just started a few weeks ago."

"Well, I suppose congratulations are in order," said Blueblood. "Now, what have you found out about that stallion Cadance's been eyeing?"

The mare reached into her outfit and removed a small dossier, which she then set on the desk. Blueblood handed her the usual bits, plus a tip for the home delivery, and she departed as quickly as she had come. He could never figure out why they insisted on the disguises, but as

long as they got him the political clout he needed, he didn't really care.

Once he was certain he was alone again, Blueblood's magic went to work, leafing through the various documents, photographs, and other assorted files his agents had managed to dig up. To their credit, they had done a very thorough job; everything from his birth certificate to his dental records was available, as were his performance evaluations, his report cards, and even what side of the bed he slept on and his favorite brand of hoof polish.

Blueblood's determined frown slowly faded as he took in page after page of biographical data. "Graduated top of his class... Excellent performance evaluations... Takes a marvelous amount of pride in his appearance..." He sighed. "I do suppose there is nothing to object to here. He is a fine officer, obviously with some...hidden intelligence. If he treats my cousin well, then I suppose..."

Then he saw it. Tucked away at the very end of the intel was Captain Shining Armor's family tree, going back fifteen generations. Blueblood could not help but let out a gasp of horror as he lay witness to his cousin's lover's sordid past. In all his life, he had never imagined anypony with this kind of heritage could ever make it past the rank of Private.

Shining Armor's family had noble blood...but they had broken free of House Sparkle over eight generations prior. According to the supplemental records, the split was over an argument over a dowry, which lead to Shiny Silver severing all ties with the family so she could marry the worst thing imaginable: a writer. The motif was only kept up for appearances, and nothing more.

This was far below the amount of noble blood required to even talk to a princess, much less date one.

Blueblood's blood ran cold as horrid thoughts rushed through his mind. He had almost fallen for his con. And according to tradition, it was his responsibility to see that things were set right. For his cousin. For his aunt. For Equestria!

Yes... That's it. She wishes to marry a stallion well below her social level! Such a horrible thing will...no doubt...lead to...

The colt's thoughts stopped dead in their tracks. Wait...that was my only objection. The only thing I could find fault with was his bloodline. Th-That is hardly a reason to put an end to such a happy couple. I was as wrong as I ever was.

He tossed onto his side, his face twisting with concern. If I go back, I'll just be the same Prince Blueblood. All everypony will know me for is being a monster. But if I stay here, I'll have to restart everything. B-But I'll still have my friends, Cadance will still like me, and Princess Luna

won't try to kill me again.

Another roll, this time ending with the colt's head pressed firmly against his pillow. Maybe...I shouldn't go back at all. Perhaps the world would be better off without a Prince Blueblood...

TO BE CONTINUED

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

A/N: Special thanks to everypony who helped proofread this one. You guys were a big help.