

A Slightly Cruller Fate Part One

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

"Excuse me, Princess?"

"Just one moment!" *Thunk.* Somewhat dazed, Luna pulled her face away from the desk. "Come in!" she said, her horn and muzzle throbbing slightly.

Through the door trotted - oh, what a surprise! Yet another pony levitating a stack of papers about twice the size of the last. "Princess," he said, oblivious to the piercingly-annoyed glare in Luna's eyes, "The request to change the Equestrian national tree from the Holly Oak to the Bay Willow has been withdrawn, so the reinstatement paperwork needs to be filled out."

This late at night? "Alright," replied Luna, already readying her quill, "I think I can-"

"And," he interrupted, "The budget cuts for the School for Gifted Unicorns need to be finalized."

That again?! "Of course." Luna nodded, keeping her voice as level as she could. "Just give me-"

"And, lest it be forgotten," said the rather daring delegate, "The paperwork regarding regulation of the Canterlot squirrel population needs to be renewed again."

Oh, by my sister's name... "Not a problem." Luna's left eyelid twitched every-so-slightly. "I'll have it done as soon as I can."

The stallion nodded. "Thank you, your majesty." He bowed his head, setting the stack of papers on the Princess' desk before he crept out.

Luna waited to hear the door click before collapsing on the newest pile of bureaucracy. She turned slightly, aiming her gaze out the window and at the night sky.

"I swear," she murmured, unusually exhausted for a near-omnipotent alicorn princess, "I swear if I receive one more paper to litigate, delegate, renew, or anything of the sort, that I'll..." She sighed. "Well, I'll certainly do *something*."

The door clicked open. "Oh, one more thing: the authenticity of Blueblood's family tree still needs verification, so if you could-"

Before the astoundingly dull stallion could utter another syllable, Luna certainly did something.

Pony Joe had seen a wide variety of sights at the donut shop. He'd seen ponies sleeping soundly after half a donut, and a dragon down three boxfuls without batting an eye. He'd seen pegasi doing barrel rolls around the ceiling, and unicorns having jousts near the bar. He'd even borne witness to some long-haired stallion accidentally letting loose a half-dozen starving crazed weasels.

The one thing he'd never seen, nor expected to, was a blue alicorn suddenly materializing in the middle of the shop, teeth bared and wings fully extended as scorched bits of paper fell to the floor around her. Not to mention having not one, not two, but three of his tables simultaneously light on fire.

"One more thing, hrm?" she muttered viciously to herself, "Sure, just one more thing to an ever-increasing pile of 'one-more-things!' Well, they can just stick all of those...things, up their-"

Before Luna could finish her self-gratifying rant, she was coated in white foam. She blinked, beginning to notice that this location failed to look the least bit like her office. The tan unicorn wielding a fire extinguisher certainly hadn't been part of the decor, nor had the blackened tables surrounding her.

"Uhm..." Luna stood for a moment, still, wide-eyed, and terribly confused. "...Hello?"

Pony Joe, ignoring Luna's timid greeting, immediately dropped the red canister and bowed deeply. "So sorry, your majesty! I didn't know that...I mean, I didn't expect...erm..." He looked up sheepishly. "...Do you need a towel or something?"

Luna emerged from the restroom, heaving finally removed the last remnants of extinguisher foam from her coat. Pony Joe had done the same to the tables, and was currently in the process of moving the damaged ones to the back and pulling out slightly less burnt replacements.

"Do you need some help?" she asked.

Pony Joe looked up and then away, still embarrassed. "No, your majesty, I -"

"Luna."

He turned back to the Princess. "I'm sorry?"

"Luna," she repeated, "I appreciate the cordiality, but I'd prefer if the atmosphere was a touch more casual for the moment."

"Uhm, alright then, Luna..." Pony Joe paused, the name sounding alien without 'Princess' preceding it. After a few seconds of him dragging tables and Luna standing uncomfortably at the side, he spoke again. "So, what brought you here?"

Constant irritation was the first answer to cross Luna's mind. "Constant irritation," she said, immediately biting her tongue.

Pony Joe froze in mid-stride. "Pardon?"

Luna sighed. "Ever since I resumed my duties as Princess, I've yet to have more than a few moments where I wasn't engulfed in paperwork and politics. I was desperate to get out."

"And so you decided to come to a donut shop?"

So that's where I am, she thought, *Explains the donut display*. "Well, I didn't really *mean* to go anywhere besides 'away from my office.' Speaking of which, I do apologize for the tables."

Pony Joe smiled. "Don't worry about it, prin - Luna. I've had far worse." Seeing Luna raise an eyebrow, he quickly added, "N-n-not that you're...I mean, it's all...um..."

He felt an immeasurable surge of relief when Luna began to laugh. "It's fine."

He nodded, the blood slowly draining back away from his cheeks. "Thanks," he said, making his way back to the bar.

Luna nodded, then noticed something: "Might I inquire as to the current absence of customers?"

"Well, I was actually closing up when you came in."

"Oh." Luna started towards the door. "I suppose I should depart, as well."

"Hey, wait just a sec!" Pony Joe slid open the donut display. "I'm not letting a princess leave my shop without a batch of donuts!"

Luna paused, then turned her gaze towards the display.

"C'mon, it's on me. Whatever donut you want, free of charge. Least I can do."

Luna smiled, hiccuping a laugh. "For letting me demolish three of your tables?"

"Sure, why not?" he replied, chuckling softly. He gestured to the bar. "C'mon, take a look. Name's Pony Joe, by the way."

"Can I call you PJ?" asked Luna with a giddy smile and not the slightest hesitation.

Pony Joe paused, the smile fading from his face. "If anypony else asked that (and believe me, they have), I'd say no, but for you..." His smile then returned with a much brighter intensity. "Just don't wear it out."

Pony Joe (or PJ, as he was now going to be relentlessly referred to) could almost swear that he heard Princess Luna squeak. *That'd be two once-in-a-lifetime events in one night*, he thought.

Luna trotted up to the bar, pulling herself onto one of the stools as she looked at the carefully arranged assortment of donuts.

"So, what's your favorite? Glazed? Chocolate cake? Blueberry butterscotch and sprinkles?"

"Um, I'm not sure..."

"C'mon, everypony has a favorite donut! Everypony that's tried one, at least!"

Smiling, it was a moment before he noticed Luna staring to the side, uncomfortably shuffling her front hooves. "Oh...you've never...?"

"Yes," she replied bluntly.

"Well..." Pony Joe smiled somewhat awkwardly. "It's hard to go wrong with donuts, so pick any of 'em."

"Alright. Erm..." Luna scanned the rows of pastries. "I'll take that one."

"...And for the entire night, I thought that this dragon was gonna be my only customer. But a couple hours before closing, in trot six mares who *really* looked a mess, I'm tellin' ya. And then, you wouldn't believe it, in trots nopony other than -"

Ring-a-ding-ding!

Pony Joe, somewhat irritated at having his story interrupted, turned to the door. "Sorry, pal, but we're clo-" The color drained from his face as he realized who the regal pony entering was. "Y-your majesty! I'm sorry, I thought-"

Princess Celestia laughed, waving a dismissive hoof. "Oh, it's quite alright." Then, having addressed the faint stallion, turned to her stunned sister. "Luna! I've been looking everywhere for you!" Laughing, she added, "I have to say, you made quite a show."

"By teleporting?" asked Luna quizzically.

"Well, less by teleporting, and more by rendering your office to a heap of rubble and ash."

"...Oh."

Celestia laughed again. "It's nothing. Just another few hours of work for the janitors." She paused, looking between the two ponies in front of her. "Sorry, am I interrupting?"

"No, you're fine, sister," said Luna as her smile returned, "Me and PJ were just talking."

Celestia raised an eyebrow, turning to the stallion. "I could have sworn that everypony referred to you as Pony Joe."

"Well, of course that's my name, but..."

"But I call him PJ," interrupted Luna, grinning as she suppressed a giggle. At that, Pony Joe blushed slightly.

Celestia's eyebrow remained raised, then lowered as her smile widened. "Well, I assume you won't be going anywhere else, then, Luna?"

Luna shrugged. "Not that I can think of."

"Alright, then." Celestia turned, trotting towards the exit. "Just come back to the castle when you're done, I'll be waiting. And don't rush yourself; you two take all the time you want."

"Thank you, Celly!" called Luna. She turned to Pony Joe, who still looked a little pale. She laughed. "Okay, you can breathe now."

"What? Oh, yeah, sorry." There was a moment's pause. "Say, what's your sister like?"

"You should know," replied Luna, "Everypony should. She makes enough public appearances."

"I know, but what I meant was whether she was any different in private."

Luna chuckled, shaking her head. "Not in the slightest. She's a decent ruler enough of the time, but all too often, she acts...she acts like a big filly, for lack of a better comparison."

"How so?"

"Well..." Luna leaned on the bar, nibbling on her donut as she searched for an example. "You remember that big disaster at the Gala this last year?"

"Yeah?"

"That was her. She invited some ponies that she *knew* would 'spice things up,' as she'd put it."

"And by spice things up, you mean..."

"Destroy just about everything, yes."

Pony Joe coughed up a laugh. "Heh...not exactly behavior I'd expect from a princess, to be honest."

"Can't say I blame you. Then again, I'm the princess who's spent her night talking in a donut bar."

Pony Joe frowned. "Sorry, you not enjoying yourself?"

Luna nearly choked on her bite of donut. "What? Oh, no no no, that's not what I meant! It's just...why are you smiling?"

Pony Joe shook his head, chuckling softly. "Nothing, you're just being...cute."

Luna blinked. "Cute?"

"Cute."

"Erm..." Luna found her cheeks very suddenly and very uncomfortably warm. "Thanks, PJ."

"Don't mention it, Luna." Pony Joe took a look at the clock. "Say, it's getting late. You need to start heading back?"

"What? Oh, of course. I still have work to do...and an office to replace," she added with a chuckle.

"Well, you need anything to go?"

"Oh, yes. I'll take some of those...what did you call them? The little ball-things?"

"Donut holes?"

"Yes, those. A bag of those, please."

"No problem." Pony Joe levitated out a paper bag, scooping out a generous portion and handing it to the Princess. "Take care, and come back soon."

"Thanks," said Luna, taking the bag and smiling, "I will."

Luna trotted through the door, the bell ringing above her as she exited onto the dark Canterlot streets. She began trotting back to the castle, then jumped when she heard: "So did you enjoy yourself?"

Luna turned, her heart ready to burst. "Celly?" She picked her bag off the ground, thanking the Goddess that none of the donut holes had spilled out. "I thought you went back to the castle?"

"I lied."

"What a surprise. Now, would you care to tell me why you decided to frighten the living moonbeams out of me?"

"I can never resist a good scare, you know that."

"Right."

"Also, I felt the need to ask you something."

"It couldn't have waited until I returned?"

"It could have, but I felt as if it was something better to be answered sooner rather than later."

"Well, what is it?" asked Luna with a heavy tinge of impatience.

Celestia, smiling mischievously, whispered in her sister's ear, "You like him, don't you?"

Luna's face instantly went a deep shade of red, and she leaned away from her sister. "Celly, I just met him!"

"That's a yes."

Luna sighed. "Alright, so I find him...appealing, to say the least. But why -"

"Luna," interrupted Celestia, "If you ask 'why would he like me,' I swear to me that I'll send you to the moon right now."

Luna scowled at her sister.

"Too soon?"

"Too soon."

"Alright, I'm sorry. But honestly, my own star pupil couldn't find a number high enough to count the reasons why *anypony*, let alone Pony Joe, would be attracted to you."

"I..." Luna sighed again. "I suppose you're right."

"Of course I am," agreed Celestia, "But let's not focus on that. We have more pressing matters at hoof."

"Like what?"

"Like when you and PJ are going to see each other again," replied Celestia with a barely-contained smile.

Luna glared at Celestia. "You're mildly evil, you know that?"

"Evil is such a harsh word, Luna. I prefer... 'fun-loving.'"

"Oh, what's the difference? Anyways, I'd prefer you to stay out of my affairs from here on out."

"Oh, I will, Luna," swore Celestia, "I promise."

Ring-a-ding-ding.

Pony Joe looked up from the counter, which he had once again been cleaning. "Evenin', sir, what'll it be?"

The stallion trotted uncomfortably through the donut shop, glancing around awkwardly at the donut-devouring ponies surrounding him. "I assume that you're Pony Joe, the proprietor of this establishment?"

"Erm...yes."

"I have a private message for you from Princess Luna."

Pony Joe could almost feel the weight of the immediate silence, as well as the numerous stares immediately thrown his way. He sighed. "What's it say?"

The stallion scoffed. "I certainly didn't read it," he said, levitating it to Pony Joe, "That's generally what the term 'private' is meant to imply."

"Oh, erm...right." Pony Joe took the letter, unrolling it.

Dear PJ,

I enjoyed our time last night, and I'm hoping to get to know you better. Would it be possible for you to meet me at the park tomorrow, say, around noon? Much appreciated.

Signed,

Princess Luna

"Luna? It's Celly."

"Just one moment!" Luna gulped down one more donut hole from the near-empty bag. "Come in!"

Celestia trotted into Luna's new office. "I must say, the decorators did a good job in here."

"Well, they're paid for something, are they not?" replied Luna, turning back to her work.

"Heh, yes, of course," agreed Celestia tentatively, "Paid."

Luna blinked, looking up from her papers with a slightly loosened jaw.

"Oh, I'm kidding, Luna. You really need to lighten up."

"Well, pardon me for not pranking everypony at every possible opportunity, Celly."

"Oh, I do not -"

Luna simply stared at her sister.

"Well...maybe a little," she admitted.

"I thought so. Anyways, what was it you wanted?"

"Well, I was thinking of how stressful things have been for you, lately. I mean, not everypony gets so worked up that they destroy their office..."

Luna eyed her sister suspiciously. "Alright, what do you have planned?"

Celestia's smile dripped with mischief. "Oh, nothing grand," she said with horribly-feigned innocence. Then, "What time is it?"

Luna, reluctant to take her eyes off of Celestia, glanced briefly at the clock. "A quarter to twelve. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Just somepony I have waiting for you down at the park..."

"Celly, what -" Luna froze, her mouth hanging open in horror. "Oh, Celestia...tell me you *didn't*..."

Celestia's smile only widened in response.

"*You didn't.*"

And wider.

"...You did." Luna glowered at her sister, receiving only laughter in response.

"Trust me, Luna. You'll thank me later."

Luna sighed, her glare keeping in strength as she stood. "For a so-called benevolent ruler, you can be a real pain in the flank."

"It's just one of the perks, Luna. You might learn to enjoy them, someday."

"Whatever you call it, we'll talk about it later." Luna checked her mane in a nearby mirror before heading towards the door. "Thanks to you, I have less than fifteen minutes to get to the park."

"Well, best not to be late," said Celestia casually, "Be a shame to waste those flowers he got you."

Luna paused. "How do you...?"

Celestia smiled again.

"...Nevermind." And she was gone.

Pony Joe sat on the bench, gazing languidly at the park fountain as he waited, only a tickle of nervousness at the back of his mind.

"PJ!"

And just like that, the nervous tickle became a throttling anxiety. He leapt up, smiling timidly with the flowers beside him.

"H-hey, Princess!" He levitated the bouquet towards her. "I thought it'd be best if I brought these. You don't mind, do you?"

Luna smiled, graciously taking the flowers and sniffing them. "Not in the slightest. I'm glad you came."

"Well, it's not every day that a princess asks you to join her in the park."

"No," agreed Luna, "I suppose not." There was a pause. "So, how's business?"

PJ began trotting, Luna following behind. "About as good as you'd expect, really."

"You get by, don't you?"

"Yeah, 'course I get by. It's just..." He sighed. "Donut-making's not exactly the most glamorous profession, ya know?"

"I suppose not," conceded Luna, "But you enjoy it, don't you?"

"Well, I sure don't hate it," he replied, "The donut-making itself ain't that bad, and I've made good friends with some of the regulars." He chuckled. "Plus, I've heard some pretty good jokes in my time there."

Luna smiled. "Can I hear one?"

PJ returned the smile. "Sure. So, these two colts are talking at school, and one of 'em says to the other, 'I know a great way to make some bits off your folks...'"

"Wait for it..."

"Snapshot, would you please..."

"Wait for it..."

"Snapshot..."

"*Wait for it...*"

"*Snapshot!*" hissed the sandy-maned pony, "I've been at this as long as you have, I know how and when to take a bucking picture!"

The blue-maned pegasus shrunk back. "Sorry, Dee."

Dee ignored the apology. "And in three...two...one..." *Click.*

The princess turned, prompting the two photo-ponies to duck further into the bushes.

"...Did you hear something, PJ?"

Pony Joe looked around, then shook his head. "Did you?"

Luna shrugged. "I guess not." She then smiled, trotting ahead. "Now, come, I want to hear more of that story."

Pony Joe chuckled. "Well, like I was saying, this customer just comes up to the bar and - I kid you not! - suggests that I start making *oatmeal donuts*. So of course I tell her..."

When the two were out of earshot, the two hidden ponies simultaneously let out a relieved sigh, followed by light giggles.

"PJ?" Snapshot snickered. "Oh, this is gonna be *fun...*"

Dee smirked. "It will be, if you don't get us caught."

"C'mon," replied Snapshot indignantly, "When have I ever gotten us caught?"

Dee, still smirking, raised her eyebrow. "Never. But it wouldn't be hard to imagine."

"Ouch." Snapshot put a hoof to his chest. "That hurts right here, Dee."

"Oh, suck it up, you filly. Now c'mon, we're gonna lose 'em."

As Dee trotted ahead, staying in the trees, Snapshot sighed. "The things I put up with..."

"What was that?"

"Er, right behind you!" he lied, flapping his wings frantically to catch up.

Dee, trotting ahead, giggled smugly. "That's what I thought."

Katalus Talrius, here, back from the dead with something of little relevance.

Sorry about the relatively short chapter, the ones to come should be longer. But anyways, if you were a 'The Melting Pot' fan, I hope this lives up to those expectations. If not...well, I still hope you enjoyed this. And, if you're not busy, maybe give 'The Melting Pot' a gander. I mean, if that's okay...

Anyways, in case the 'Part One' wasn't clear enough, this will be one of a series. How long a series? No pony knows, but likely not more than four.

And that's about it. Oh, except for one thing: for better or for worse, through hell and high-water, and regardless of how y'all like this story...

It's good to be back.

-Katalus Talrius