

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 Twelve

From the moment Sky Bloom and Blueblood entered the castle foyer, the colt could tell that something was off. Even when the castle was at its busiest, there was always a certain air of excitement and exuberance about the halls, as if the mere idea of being in such a grand palace was enough to make a pony feel giddy. Blueblood could feel none of that.

The guards somehow looked colder and sterner than usual, their usual empty frowns more resembling a growling hound about to chomp into its latest meal. Only a hoofful of servants could be seen charging through the hallways, far less than one usually expected this late in the afternoon. Even worse, his ears could detect more than a few voices whispering in the distance, and while it was too far away to make their speech out clearly, it was obvious he was the center of the conversation.

As he turned to inquire about this, Sky Bloom spoke. "The Princesses wish to speak to you immediately."

The moment the words penetrated his thick skull, Blueblood's little blue blood vessels froze into chunks of ice. His brow darkened as a chilled sweat began to pour across his body. "Wh-What? D-Did they say why?"

Sky Bloom was silent for a moment, as if afraid to answer that particular line of inquiry. Blueblood simply stood there, his eyes never once leaving the servant. He had been a victim of that same dumbstruck expression – and indeed, delivered it more than once – and knew all he had to do was wait it out. Before long, he would...

"Your sentence has been decided upon."

Blueblood's jaw dropped as sudden bolts of electric fear raced across the tiny grey cells of his brain. "Wh-What? B-But I thought I..."

"Things have changed," Sky Bloom said. In but the span of a few seconds, her entire mood seemed to alter, sliding from a pony who had but hours before threatened excruciating pain upon a noblepony to an executioner waiting to pull the switch on the guillotine. "In any case, report to Princess Celestia's study immediately. I'll go on ahead to let her know of your return."

"B-But wait...!" Blueblood's voice grew increasingly agitated and horrified as the mare trotted up the stairs and into the deep recesses of the castle's many hallways. "Wh-What did they say? Do you know what's going to happen? Should I dress up? Get my own rope?"

The colt finally just rolled onto his back and let out a mournful cry to the ceiling blocking his view of the heavens. "Why doesn't anypony tell me *anything*?"

Time seemed to slow as Blueblood stepped across the great expanse of Equestria's capital residence. Even with his reduced perspective taken into account, everything around him seemed so much larger and more menacing than it had this morning. The many frescos and portraits of famous ponies – not to mention Celestia – seemed to look down on him with everything from pity to disdain. The suits of armor sent shivers down his spine with every pass, as if they would come alive at any moment and haul him back to the dungeons. The guards remained as stoic as ever, but the servants wavered between chuckling and moaning at his approach. No doubt more than a few had been wronged by him in the past, given his track record.

It's just as well. His ears drooped. I deserve to be hated.

After over half an hour of proceeding at this slow walk, he finally reached the double doors to Celestia's private study. He could already hear voices on the other side, no doubt the three celebrating his oncoming banishment or whatever additional punishment they had conjured up for their favorite victim. His hoof simply hovered in mid-air for almost a full minute before he could finally muster the strength to knock, and even then it amounted to little more than a few gentle raps on the wooden door.

In an instant, the sounds from the study immediately ceased, save for what sounded like pillows, or at least something else fairly light and amorphous, being dragged about on the ground. Finally, Princess Celestia's voice emerged. "Enter."

Despite the shaking in his body, Blueblood complied with his aunt's wishes and pushed one side of the doors open, stopping just when he could fit his head through the gap. Sure enough, Princess Celestia was already inside, sitting behind what looked like a massive desk from the secretary pool downstairs. Seated next to her was Princess Luna, looking as dour as ever. And out of the corner of his eye, he could make out Shining Armor, still dressed in his full armor and sitting at attention like he was ready to discipline a disobedient grunt.

"Would you mind coming inside?" Luna said in a detached voice. "We have much to discuss, and I tired of talking to doors a thousand years ago." Shining Armor's head spun about in confusion, while Celestia looked down at the desk guiltily. Luna simply stared ahead, barely registering her Captain's change in focus. "You would be amazed what you do when you have nopony to talk to."

Rather than risk drawing out the tension any longer and unveiling even more tragic secrets, Blueblood finished pushing the door open, allowing it to swing closed behind him. Princess Celestia silently pointed at a simple brown pillow, directly in front of the middle of the desk. Taking the gesture as the order it was intended to be, the colt walked over to the cushion and seated himself.

Celestia looked down on Blueblood, her eyes half-closed with a mixture of concern and relief. "My nephew, we fear that this trial must draw to a close. For almost two weeks now, you have been in the body of a colt, attending school, playing with other foals, and attempting to learn from your past misdeeds."

"Despite our misgivings, you have shown some semblance of improving yourself," Luna added. "I was especially surprised to see you growing in such a way, given the monstrous personality you displayed during my brief time as sole ruler." Blueblood's ears flattened at the reminder. "However, while you have changed much, you still have much to atone for."

"Still, just admitting you were wrong and want to make up for it is a first step," Shining Armor said. "As someone who's been on the receiving end of your past behavior, I don't know if I'm ready to really forgive you for what you did to Cadance and myself, and especially for putting Twily..." He blushed as all three ponies cocked eyebrows at his sister's nickname. "...Twilight into danger, but I don't want to deprive you of the chance to continue."

Blueblood's eyes lit up just slightly. "But...what is my sentence, then?"

Princess Luna cleared her throat before continuing, doing her best to keep looking formal and imposing. "Before the incident with Frazzleberry's son, we were ready to find you guilty. We would have had the curse broken, followed by your removal from Equestria until such a time that you could have proven yourself worthy of return."

The colt's light died. "I...see..." he squeaked.

"However," said Celestia, "the attitude you displayed during that meeting showed us something we hadn't noticed. You see, the point of the trial was not just to make you a better pony. Anypony can work to correct faults and mistakes that are theirs alone. But to offer that to others is something not everypony can do. By all accounts, Orange Peel has offered you nothing but scorn and hatred, and yet when you had the chance to leave him to his fate, you stepped in at

his defense.”

Blueblood shook his head. “I just...saw so many similarities between us...I mean, how I used to be. He wasn’t a nice pony, but he didn’t deserve to go through everything I had to go through.”

Celestia smiled and winked at the colt. “Yes, I know.”

Blueblood cocked his head slightly to the left, an expression Luna and Shining Armor were quick to share. Celestia simply continued to grin wryly at everypony else, feeling more than a little smug in her scheming and manipulations. “Well...I suppose an explanation is in order,” she said as she rose to her hooves.

“An...explanation...” Shining Armor’s eyes lit up like firecrackers as his brain finally started to work out the secrets. “Wait, do you mean...?”

Celestia smiled at the Captain in that way that also told him to keep quiet and not ruin the surprise. Her horn came alive with a golden glow, her magic pulling off her royal vestments and setting them aside. Luna blushed as she bore witness to her sister’s naked glory; still, it was nowhere near as bad as Shining Armor seemingly turning into a pony-tomato hybrid at the sight of his matriarchal ruler in such a state. Before Blueblood could jump on board the embarrassment train, the magical field began to grow out from the horn’s base and swallow Celestia’s entire body, shielding it from view. Once every inch of her body had been covered, the power contracted in on itself, until finally it was about the size of the average mare.

Its role complete, the magic peeled away like an orange, revealing Sky Bloom.

Shining Armor’s jaw dropped. He had never seen anything like that before, even with Twilight. Blueblood stood up in shock, his left eye twitching slightly from the sudden revelation. “Y-You mean...all this time?”

Sky Bloom – or rather, Celestia – nodded her head. “I needed to keep an eye on you to make sure you were all right, so I did some research, found an old disguise spell, and...masqueraded as a part of my own staff. If I timed things perfectly, I could freely enter and leave the castle without anypony even noticing I was missing.”

“Then why didn’t you tell us?” Luna asked. Her voice dripped with insincerity, as if she already knew the answer before even posing the question.

“Because I wanted to make sure Blueblood wouldn’t know,” Celestia said, just before stepping up to her still-stunned nephew. “The fewer ponies that knew about this, the smaller the chance anypony would accidentally let slip what was going on.”

Celestia knelt next to Blueblood, her gentle eyes locking with his own shivering pupils. “And

besides, it gave me a chance to talk to you not as some kind of jailer or warden, but as just another pony. Somepony who cared about you and wanted you to succeed, despite all the horrible things you've done. I could be there to offer you advice, to listen to the pain of your day, to offer you a shoulder to cry on, and all without you ever knowing. I apologize for deceiving all of you, but it was the only way that made sense to me."

"I...I..." Blueblood's jaw flapped about for a few seconds, creating a sound not unlike a trout floundering about on a pier. Every fiber of his being burned with the fiery aftertaste of betrayal, coupled with the tang of disgust, and finally topped with a little cherry of discontent. Of all the ponies in this room, Princess Celestia was the only one Blueblood knew he could trust; after all, she hadn't thrown him in a dungeon or forced him to do sit-ups that would snap a normal pony's spine. But that had all been a lie. She was still spying on him, never letting him have a moment's rest, just waiting for him to slip up and land right back on the executioner's block...

"I'm fine."

The Alicorn smiled and nodded, all the while admonishing herself for perpetuating this scam in the first place. She rose back to her hooves and strode back to the table, plopping her rear down like she had just conquered an entire forest of Ursa Majors. By this point, Shining Armor had had more than enough time to compose himself once again, even if that only amounted to finally being able to close his mouth and stop looking at his ruler, employer and future in-law. Luna just remained as cool as always, if a tad bored of her sister's tired old tricks.

"And with that lovely bit of business out of the way, it's time to discuss the true reason we're here," Celestia said. She clapped her hooves against the tabletop, trying to look as impressive as possible. "With this new piece of evidence, we can safely say that you have shown yourself more than deserving of a second chance."

Blueblood's mood snapped around almost instantaneously. The colt's jaw practically shattered due to the sudden shift from morose defeatism to absolute ecstasy. "Y-You mean you're not going to banish me?"

"That's up to you," Shining Armor coldly added.

The Captain turned to the two Alicorns, nodding to them to continue explaining the plan. Fortunately, passing judgment just happened to be Luna's thing the last couple weeks, so she was quick to seize the opportunity to give Blueblood his choice in poisons. "While you have shown great progress, my little pony, there is still much for you to learn. I know how difficult it is to seek atonement, especially when the world seems to be...plotting against you." She paused briefly, took a breath, and then continued. "Therefore, we will give you a choice."

"Your first option is to be returned to your rightful age," said Celestia. "It is a simple matter to undo the enchantments keeping you this way, assuming the counterspell is still accurate. Once

this is done, we will assist you in coordinating your community service, provide you with a modest stipend, and promote you as a changed stallion as best we can. However, you must realize that your actions have attracted no small measure of scorn, if the tabloids are to be believed, and you will no doubt be facing a very, very harsh response to those you wish to apologize to.”

Blueblood nodded along, his mind already aching over the implications of this decision. “And the other?”

“The Princesses can keep you this way,” said Shining Armor. “We can arrange a living situation and promote you as an entirely new pony. However, Prince Blueblood will, in effect, be considered *caballus non-grata* for the foreseeable future. You would have to completely abandon your old life.”

The colt shook his head. His entire body shivered under the weight of the options before him. “I-I see...so those are my only options?”

“What we are proposing is not absolution,” Luna said grimly. “No matter what decision you make today, know that your penance is only beginning. You have much to answer for, perhaps far more than most ponies your age, and it will be some time before we could consider you fully atoned for your deeds. There is also the matter of your estate, which we must discuss after the proceedings have been concluded.”

“But no matter what happens, you have my support,” Celestia added. “Now, what will you do?”

Blueblood stared blankly ahead, his eyes practically graying as the enormity of this decision began to weigh upon him. He was out of time, with only enough rope to hang himself with. No matter what choice he made, he would lose something important. As an adult, he would lose the friendships he had built, not to mention having to return to an identity he had come to hate. But as a foal, there was no way to make up for his misdeeds, at least not by himself.

His mind rocked back and forth, weighing and counterweighing both options. Tiny beads of sweat trickled down his coat as he struggled to intone the words that would seal his fate forever.

“I...want to stay a foal.”

And in a moment, it all came crashing down. Princess Celestia raised an eyebrow at her nephew’s decision, Luna glanced at her sister as if to make sure this was a part of her grand plan, and Shining Armor simply looked about in confusion over how he should respond to this. Blueblood’s own nerves, however, seemed to calm themselves now that he had made his decision. His breathing became less labored, the sweat ceasing to pour from his brow, and his limbs seemed less flaccid and more proud and stately than before.

Now that the awkward period had passed, Celestia spoke. "May I ask why you made your decision?"

Blueblood was quiet for a moment, desperately trying to find just the right words to convince his skeptical aunt. "Because I have a second chance. There's nothing waiting for me if I become an adult again. I have no family left, no friends, nopony whose life I hadn't ruined with my mere presence. Everypony just seems happier with me like this."

Celestia opened her mouth to protest, but she could find no words to counter his claim. She tried to talk of the ponies in the court missing him, but that would be a lie. Cadance had been nothing but kind to him...but only because she thought he was Leon. She tried to speak of his family, but they were gone. His employees? All moved on to other nobles or occupations. His friends? As far as she knew, he had none. And as for herself?

"...I can see your point," she said, her voice little more than a defeated grumble. The other two ponies at the table simply sat as still as statues, their eyes reflecting a combination of disappointment and bewilderment at Blueblood's decision. "Before we can move on, however, there are some...points that must be addressed."

"Points?" Blueblood tilted his head about eight degrees to the right.

Celestia nodded her head. "Like the matter of your estate. While it has been in state custody since the time of your banishment, there still are a few effects that need to be looked into. I was hoping you would assist Princess Luna in finalizing the details."

Out of the corner of her eye, the Sun Alicorn could already see the gears spinning about in Luna's head. Her little sister eyed her with the special kind of mistrust that comes with knowing the same pony for millennia. "Of...course. I would very much appreciate the help...finding things and...doing them...in a proper manner..."

"We shall discuss the rest of your affairs later," Celestia said just before pulling herself up. "Now, if you will please follow Princess Luna to the chariots, we shall get this matter settled. Captain Armor, I will need to see you in my office within the hour to discuss the upcoming guard rotations." Shining jumped to his hooves and snapped a salute, his features hardening into the stone-cold exterior of a mighty warrior as he did so.

Her orders complete, the Princess returned her attentions to the pony at the center of all this. Blueblood was about as still as a cornered kitten, his fur bristling at her sight. When she smiled, however, he seemed to calm almost instantaneously. "I fear my schedule will be full the rest of the day, but I look forward to speaking to you tomorrow. By then, we'll have everything figured out."

And with that, she walked out the door, turned down the hall, and disappeared. Shining Armor

trotted along after her, but stopped as he came alongside Blueblood. Again, the colt bristled slightly at his approach, but instead of ordering him to drop and give him fifty or whatever, the Captain of the Royal Guard merely gave a salute before leaving the scene.

Only two ponies remained in the study: Blueblood and Princess Luna. The mare let out a sigh that would make the very heavens turn cold and rose to her hooves. "Come along, then. It is time you went home."

Blueblood's jaw hung open in horror as the two drew up to his estate.

The once proud ancestral home of the Blueblood family was now a decaying ruin. The wrought-iron gate barely hung to its hinges, while vines and overgrowth chipped away at the walls. The path leading up to his front door was in even worse shape, as the runaway weeds and grass has almost completely swallowed it up. Bits and pieces of the chimney barely sat straight upon decaying mortar, with a few red chunks already decorating the outside gardens. The latest layer of paint had long since begun to chip away, leaving what painted surfaces remained looking like somepony had emptied their stomach onto a dollhouse. The windows were so caked with dust and dirt that they were almost entirely opaque.

Luna shrugged as she walked past the colt. "What's wrong?"

"Wh-What happened to this place?" he asked in a quivering voice. "I-It's barely been two weeks! Why does it look like nopony's lived here for centuries?"

"This is far from the first property I have seen end this way. If you do not keep up your house, it can fall apart within moments. And I fear that we...did not find maintaining an abandoned building a major concern." Luna pointed up to the sky, where a hoofful of guards sat in wait on specialized clouds. "We only used enough security to keep looters from ransacking the estate. Their duties do not include yard work and home repair."

The words did little to appease Blueblood's horror. His eyes burned as he walked closer and closer to the front door. *My home...my beautiful estate. There will be so much to rebuild, to bury, and...to build and bury simultaneously. No wonder Princess Celestia needed my help with sorting this place out.*

Luna's magic worked its way around the doorknob, undoing the magical locks the sisters had put into place and slowly pulling it open. Fortunately, the door's hinges weren't subject to the same rapid passage of time, and flew open without so much as a squeak. The dread feeling in Blueblood's heart gradually diminished as he stepped within the front foyer of the house he had once called home. To his amazement, all of the furniture remained exactly where it had been, with only the white cloths draped over them serving to remind him that somepony else had been

there. A thick layer of dust covered every inch of the room, but that was nothing some furniture polish and elbow grease wouldn't fix.

Slowly, the big princess and the little prince walked through every inch of the ancient house's ground floor, their eyes peeled for any signs of cobwebs, rats, or solicitors. Everywhere they went, however, it just looked exactly the same. Even worse, the electricity seemed to be turned off, leaving everything draped in a foreboding grayness. The floorboards squeaked underneath his hooves, far more so than when he had been living there, and the doors squeaked loudly with every push.

The procession continued until they reached the house's ballroom. Sure enough, the furniture was still here, from the family's ancient grand piano to the tables and chairs stacked on the side. Were it not for the dust and dirt, it could have even matched the grandiosity of the castle's own ballroom, if only a bit smaller in size.

Luna barely held back an undignified sneezing fit as she levitated the covers off of the piano. Her hoof traced across the wonderfully grained surface, taking in the exquisite craftsponyship of the instrument. Despite being in the house of a pony she had only just recently moved up to her "Barely Tolerable" list, she still couldn't help but smile. "This is a...Crestofori design, correct?"

Blueblood simply shrugged before coughing up a few dustballs. "I think so. My grandparents based the design on some of the earliest pianos left in Equestria. They said it was to prove how long our family had stood, not to mention just how powerful and wealthy our house was." He snickered a bit at the irony of it all. "And now there's no house left, thanks to me."

"Correct," Luna said. Blueblood opened his mouth to offer some sort of retort, but wisely decided against doing so while he was still in Luna's good graces. Instead, he simply returned to searching through the room, unearthing more priceless treasures and family portraits with every swipe of his hooves. Every inch of the ballroom's walls were covered with fine representations of the various heads and members of the Blueblood family, highlighting their magnificent triumphs throughout Canterlot history.

On one mural was their triumph over the underclasses during the Great Cake Riots, also known as the day Celestia learned to make sure her speech pages were in the right order and not announce what was on the menu for the celebratory banquet *before* telling them that she had resolved the bread shortage.

Another was a lovely portrait of Blueblood City, a town his ancestors had planned on building on a lovely patch of land just a few hours away from Canterlot. It would have served as a prosperous farming community, where ponies would feel free to work and play in safety, while also making the family a fortune from the taxes. It would have worked, too, if the Princess hadn't given the same land to some seed sellers.

And then there was...

"Your Great-Grandfather, General Longsword. Were it not for his command at the Battle of Fetlock Hold, Equestria would have fallen to the Griffon Kingdom long ago."

Blueblood gulped in fascination. The pony in the picture was so...magnificent in his appearance, so strong, so powerful. And here he was, a colt whose only claim to fame was being Princess Celestia's favorite family member. "I never knew we had so many amazing ponies in our family."

Scarlet Letter chuckled and ruffled his son's mane, albeit only after making sure the room was clear of servants. "Of course. And I have no doubt that you will be even greater."

The colt snickered and pushed his father's hoof away, blushing slightly from the sudden parental contact. "Come on, dad. I'm just..."

"Son, our family is one of the oldest in Canterlot. We can trace our heritage all the way back to Princess Celestia herself. I've been around long enough to recognize the potential for greatness when I see it, and you have it. You're already smarter than most of the colts your age. Just remember that..."

"You are a Prince of Equestria, and you must live up to your title."

Luna looked over from the piano, her hoof tapping on an e-flat as she did so. "Did you say something?" Blueblood quickly shook his head negatively, and despite the slight quivering in his eyes, it was enough to get her off of his back and back to examining the instrument. She didn't even notice Blueblood sneaking out of the ballroom and back to the front hall.

The colt stopped only when he reached the bottom steps of the staircase leading up to the bedrooms. His own chamber was one of the first doors upon reaching the top, a wonderful gift when one was trying to sneak about during the night. Of course, those stupid Pegasus guards had to keep catching him, even after the most impressive juice box heist in Equestrian history. *Those...Pegasus ponies and their wings! How dare they...*

"Hey!"

Blueblood's eyes snapped open as the disembodied voice rang through his ears. He spun about on the spot, surveying every inch of the hall, but not a single other soul could be seen. Still, he could swear he was hearing Lofty...

The colt froze. *That's right...I...need to stop thinking like that. All the ponies are equal, Blueblood. Remember that.*

After a few seconds of shaking his head to knock out the bad thoughts, Blueblood was finally

ready to begin his epic adventures in stair climbing. The floorboards creaked slightly with every step, reminding the colt of just how lax he had been with his home's upkeep. Then again, there wasn't much left in his monthly budgets after he figured out the hoof polish, replacement combs, and other assorted necessities. His appearance was of the upmost importance, after all. And besides, cake frosting wasn't going to wash *itself* out of his coat.

The second story was in no better condition than the first. The floor was coated with a thick layer of dust, while spiders danced about in the cobwebs that lined the ceiling. Fortunately, none of the doors were locked, and he was soon able to enter a once-sacred chamber that had been abandoned for all of two weeks: his bedroom. Just like everything else in the house, the room was exactly as he had remembered it, save for the guard he had knocked out missing from his closet.

The colt heaved a great sigh, his breath displacing some of the dust on the ground, and finally stepped towards the small bookshelf he had next to his bed. The wooden furniture piece was still loaded with some of his favorite tomes, from A Brief History of Canterlot Royalty to The Adventures of Mauvebeard the Pirate.

"Honestly, Blueblood," Velvet Cushion muttered, "what do you see in such drive!"

The foal looked up from beneath his covers, just in case the Boogey Pony was starting to stir and taking a look around before jumping out. "But it's fun!"

"It's a stallion rampaging around the ocean, laying waste to villages and pillaging frigates."

"But he's doing it on Celestia's orders! It's the only way to stop the Griffons from cutting off Equestria's sea trade!"

Cushion let out a parental moan and slammed the book closed. "Dear, this is not the kind of material a prince should be enjoying. Swashbuckling pirates, wenches, sailing for months at a time, all of those are for ponies of peasant stock."

Blueblood gasped in horror. He had heard of peasants before, but had never seen one. Still, they had to be nasty customers if his mother was so worried he would become one.

"B-But...Mauvebeard is a Duke, remember? He gave up his title so he could defend Equestria in ways a noblepony never could!" The colt took in a deep breath and puffed out his chest. "And one day, I'm going to be as brave and amazing as he is!"

Velvet rolled her eyes and floated the book back to the shelf. "Right now, it's time for all the good little ponies to go to sleep. You'll need that shut-eye if you're going to grow up into a big, handsome prince, after all."

Blueblood barely suppressed a giggle, with but the tiniest gasp of a snort escaping his budding

propriety settings. The foal wiggled his way deep into the covers, his mother applying the finishing touches with a few tucks of her hooves and a peck on the cheek. The pleasant touch of his mother's warmth against his cheek caused the gears powering the colt's motor to rapidly slow, and before long Blueblood let out a yawn and closed his eyes.

A grin spread across Cushion's lips as her little stallion drifted off to rest. "Sweet dreams, Blueblood."

The colt gave another great big yawn and fidgeted just slightly. "Good night, mom," Blueblood muttered to nopony in particular. In the time since he had begun reminiscing, the colt had climbed onto his old bed, not even bothering to remove the white sheets and brush off the dust. He blinked his eyes, but no more visions seemed to come. He was alone until Luna inevitably discovered where he had wandered off to.

Blueblood's gaze gradually shifted along the floor until he reached the bookshelf again. The books were still all there, not a single one moved. The colt rubbed his eyelids, but nothing changed. B-But it was so real. Mother...and...

Deep within the colt's heart, a switch seemed to be pulled. This house...these things...my parents...none of them...

The colt chocked and snorted as a familiar burning sensation spread across the bottom of his eyes. "No...No..."

"Is something wrong?"

The only sign that Blueblood had even heard Luna's question was a tiny flick of his right ear. The Night Mare slowly walked up to the bedside and sat on her haunches. Her close proximity only made Blueblood tense up even more. "Blueblood, I know we have had our...disagreements, but if there is something I can..."

"I'm fine!" the colt shouted, causing the Princess to recoil in surprise. "I...I just...I have to..." From that point on, his attempts at linguistic communication degenerated into a string of nonsensical moans and syllables, accompanied by the occasional hack and sob. Luna simply sat at the spot, her hoof slowly stroking the colt's back. It was several minutes before Blueblood could speak coherently again. "I'm sorry. I just...can't spend any time here without remembering...things."

Luna smiled and sighed. "I can understand. After all, this is your family estate. So much history within these very walls..." She clicked her tongue and shook her head. "In any case, I think things are in order here. Shall we return to the castle?"

Nodding his head, the colt jumped down from the bed and slowly walked out the door. If nothing

else, returning home had opened his eyes to an unfortunate, unavoidable truth. He knew what he had to do. No more running away. No more shifting the blame onto others. It was time to atone for his mistakes.

And he knew just who he had to talk to.

Cadance groaned as she looked over the latest advertising pamphlet Shining Armor had dispensed on her desk. This time it was for one of the local sandwich shops, advertising their new “Twenty Ponies Long” party meal, perfect for hoofball parties and family gathers, but not so much for weddings. Still, the princess managed to smile a little, even as her fiancé’s tactics became more and more obvious. *At least he’s not trying to wear his armor down the aisle anymore. I swear, if he had his way, he wouldn’t even take that off for the wedding night.*

A sharp knock emerged from the bottom of her door. She quickly tucked the advertisement into one of her desk drawers and walked up to the door, willing it open as she approached. Standing on the other end was none other than her long-lost nephew, eyeing her with no small sense of failure. “Leon, what’s wrong?”

“C-Cadance,” he muttered, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

The mare smiled warmly, looking more and more like her aunt every day. She quickly stepped aside, allowing the colt access to the room itself. Slowly, Blueblood worked his way in, his head still locked on the floor. Once the door was closed, Cadance climbed into her personal chair and patted the small seat next to her. “Have a seat and tell me all about it.”

Reluctantly, the colt climbed into the seat, still not daring to look at his cousin. “Cadance, it’s...well, it’s about...”

The princess sighed. “It’s about your father, isn’t it?”

The colt was silent for a moment, despite his brain’s desire to blurt out who he truly was. Still, something was holding him back. He didn’t know if it was common sense or fear talking, and he didn’t care anymore. “Yes. You told me you didn’t like him, but...why?”

Cadance turned away while letting out a mournful sigh. “That’s a very, very long story. I mean, we were close for such a long time, but then something happened. We both changed, and he became...something terrible...”

Blueblood nodded along as she told her tale, already knowing what she was going to say.

The Canterlot Garden Party was in full swing, as well it should be. Everypony who was anypony had already received an invitation, prepared their finest vestments to prove their worth, and were already on the castle grounds to feast on tiny appetizers and listen to the prattling of the various gossips and rumor mongers running about. The musical accompaniment was just barely finishing their opening movement, playing the same symphonies that had been performed for centuries straight.

And standing at the center of it all was Princess Cadance. Her jade-colored gown was draped across her body like a green blanket, leaving just enough room for her wings to be on display. Around her stood a host of ponies, most of them mares, and all of them talking freely to the winged pony in their midst. It was just as Celestia had said; one could hardly tell that she had not a friend in the world when she was but a foal.

Captain Shining Armor was also in attendance, albeit overseeing the party's security rather than actually participating. He wasn't even allowed so much as a single cracker, whereas before he could gladly sneak out as many of the things as he could get away with. Such was the responsibility of the Captain of the Royal Guard to set the right example for his subordinates, even the ones he had been chugging cider with only a week prior.

Prince Blueblood, meanwhile, watched the scene before him with a grim scowl on his face. His magic shakily moved his cup from the punch as something slowly worked its way through his system, building his rage and causing his head to feel like it had been clobbered by a thousand clubs. The other ponies seemed to pay him no heed; not even Lemon Lime seemed to notice the prince, his attentions instead locked on the princess he once tortured and his teetering old father.

"So, tell me all about it," asked a mare.

Cadance sipped her punch, coughing a little as a peculiar burning sensation touched her tongue. "About what?"

Another mare gave her a gentle nudge on the shoulder. Blueblood's cup shook slightly at this affront to royal personal space. "About Shining Armor, of course! Come on, it's not everypony who gets to take the Captain of the Guard to the Grand Galloping Gala!"

Cadance's cheeks burned a bright red, which was admittedly hard to notice against her normal coat color. Fortunately, her irises contracting to the size of fleas was a pretty clear indication of her unease, as was her attempts to fight back her natural reflex to extend her wings at such a feeling. Her cup twirled about in a haphazard manner as she seemed to start losing her grip on her magic. "W-Well, he's a...perfect gentlecolt, if that's what you mean. He held all the doors open, insisted on paying for the meal, and even walked me back to my quarters." Her eyelids half-closed. "It was a bit of a pain, I suppose, but he meant well, and we had a lot of fun."

The mares around her only sighed. "Princess, that's not what we meant. What happened...after the Gala?"

Cadance shrugged. "I took my dress off, climbed into bed, and went to sleep. Nothing more."

A collective moan of disbelief, frustration, and futility arose from the mares, driving Cadance's cheeks even further up the color palette. Even from a distance, Blueblood missed none of this. His cousin's naiveté about her position in Equestrian society was matched only by her inability to fess up to the true nature of their relationship. After all, Shining Armor was of common birth legally, and he knew what those common ponies were like. Their carnal desires and malicious attitudes would only drag Cadance into shame and scandal.

He looked down at his drink. His vision was getting hazy, but he could still think straight enough. If Princess Celestia was not going to do what was necessary, then he had no choice but to take matters into his own hooves. And if Cadance wasn't willing to listen...

"Then I have to make her listen."

The stallion flung the cup aside with a single burst of magic, the glassware losing what remained of its tenth refilling before landing in the bushes. Using what little he remembered from the military classes at the Academy, he marched forward, albeit at a bit of a slant, until he was directly behind the unsuspecting group. "Cadance...we need to talk. Now."

The mares recognized the voice almost immediately, and quickly made tracks to elsewhere. Only Cadance remained behind, staring at her obviously inebriated cousin with no small measure of concern and frustration. Shining Armor took a few steps forward, but otherwise made no attempt to act, at least not until he knew what was fully going on.

"A-Are you drunk, Blueblood?" Cadance asked.

Blueblood's face twisted into a bit of a growl. "Of course not. Only peasants can get drunk. You will learn that lesson quite well once you've been reduced to one."

Cadance raised an eyebrow. "What are you talking about?"

"Have you considered what would happen to you if you married your beloved Captain?" The Prince scowled. "Do you really wish to spend your life...cleaning lice out of blankets and...scrubbing bird droppings off the sidewalk?"

The Princess facehoofed at her cousin's stupidity. Around them, the guests began to break away from their usual rounds of carousing and rumor mongering in favor of the upcoming drama. Only the band continued to play on, if only because their contract required them to

proceed regardless of any chaos that happened to be occurring around them. It was the only way they ever got through last year's Garden Party, especially when the baguettes started flying.

"Blueblood, we have been through this time and again. I love Shining Armor, and he loves me back. And as crude as you can be right now, I want nothing more than for you to remain a part of our lives. So please, just let this go."

The Prince snorted. He had heard this same argument time and again. Whether it was Princess Celestia threatening to remove his name from all upcoming guests lists, or Cadance demanding that he get rid of those ponies who were following her all day, everypony had tried to silence him and his most virtuous cause. But despite his determination, the mare still seemed determined to ruin her life. Nothing seemed to reach her...save perhaps this.

Seeing no more value in wasting time with her cousin, Cadance spun about to rejoin the others by the stage. She had made it exactly three steps by the time he spoke. "Tell me, does Shining Armor know he's marrying a freak?"

Everything froze, from the highest-and-mightiest noblepony to the smallest blade of grass. The band, contract or no, screeched to a halt; the new cellist's bow went flying into Shining Armor's helmet from her hoof's sudden deceleration. The blow was enough to knock some resin into the Captain's eye, stunning him just long enough for the spectacle to continue.

Cadance's jaw dropped just slightly, her eyes shaking with disbelief. "D-Did you just...?"

Blueblood smirked. At last, she was listening. "You heard me. You're a freak, a mutant, a disgrace to Equestria's noble bloodlines. Only Princess Celestia is special enough to have both wings and a horn. Somepony like you doesn't even deserve to be in the same room as the rest of us. If there was any justice in Equestria, you'd be sitting on a street corner somewhere, begging for whatever scraps you can find like other deformed ponies!"

A collective gasp, coupled with the sound of glasses and appetizers hitting the ground, echoed across the party grounds. Cadance coughed up a small sob, her eyes already stinging with tears. Her pained expression was a showcase of the years of memories she had struggled so hard to repress. "W-Why are you...?"

"No wonder your parents never wanted anything to do with you." Blueblood's grin continued to spread itself out, gradually morphing into a contemptible sneer. "It wasn't just because they were good ponies following a sacred tradition. No, they knew their daughter would grow up to be nothing more than another disappointment."

The pain shot through Cadance's brain like a bullet. Her ears perked and twitched as she swore she could hear the mocking laughter of foals coming from all sides. She pulled her wings so

tightly against her body that it felt like she was wearing a corset, just in case somepony tried to pull out her feathers. Her voice became hushed and raspy, as if she was afraid the wrong ponies would hear. "P-Please...stop..."

Shining Armor finally recovered enough from the resin attack to begin making his way forward, but it was too late to stop Blueblood's final assault. "No wonder your special talent is making ponies love you. Why else would anypony even want to date a winged freak like you?!"

By the time Shining Armor's charge had connected with Blueblood's body, the damage had already been done. The proud, confident mare that had once stood before them was now little more than a broken little filly. She hacked and coughed a few more sobs before galloping out of the garden and into the castle itself. Her cries bounced about the grounds for several more seconds before gradually dissipating into the ether.

Blueblood sat silently as Cadance wiped her eyes clean. Her own view on the events matched up cleanly with his memory. "S-So what did you do after that?"

Cadance let out a deep breath. The very act of exhaling seemed to have a miraculous effect on her composition. "I went right to Princess Celestia and told her everything. Obviously, Shining Armor had Blueblood thrown out for disrupting the party, but there was nothing we could actually charge him with. As far as I know, he went right back home and continued his life like nothing had happened."

"But he never apologized?" the colt asked. Not that there was any reason to; he already knew the answer well enough.

Cadance shook her head. "No, he didn't. In fact, he never spoke to me again after that. Even if he had wanted to, Shining wouldn't have allowed it. He kept a running guard around me whenever Blueblood and I were in the castle at the same time. The Grand Galloping Galas were the worst, though." A pause. "Fortunately, Shining Armor and I got permission to skip the last one. From what I hear, it was an absolute disaster. I know Blueblood would never let it go."

Blueblood nodded in agreement. The Gala certainly was a fiasco, thanks to those six ponies. Those six ponies he had tried to kill and whose home he wanted razed because they got cake on his suit. The colt arched his back slightly and let out as mighty a cough as he could raise, if only to break away at the guilt building up inside. "So...that was it, then?"

The Princess nodded her head once. "Yes, I suppose so. I wasn't here when your father was banished, but for something like that to happen, he must have done something quite terrible." She sighed. "I...I guess I would like to meet him again, just to see if he was all right. He is an awful pony, Leon, but he's still my cousin. And as much as I want to just walk away and leave

him to die, I can't do it. Still, I should be lucky that you're here."

Blueblood cocked an eye. "What do you mean?"

"You're a smart, curious little colt from what I've seen," Cadance said with a smile. "I know things have been pretty rough the last couple of weeks, but you have a bright future ahead of you. No matter what Blueblood is responsible for, you do not have to suffer because of his actions."

The colt squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. He could already feel a wave of nausea rushing through his body, threatening to make this confession into a spectacle to rival the Grand Galloping Gala. "Cadance...I have to tell you the truth."

The Princess, ever blind to the patently obvious, cocked her head to the side and grinned in the most guilt-slinging way possible. "About what, dear?"

"A-About..."

The colt's eyes were shut so tight that they felt like they were on fire. His breathing became sharper and heavier with every passing second. He could no longer control the emotions burning inside of him. "I-I'm Prince Blueblood."

"Now you shouldn't say things like that," Cadance said. Her hoof glided out and tapped the colt on the shoulder, petting him much like a cat. "Like I said, you're not..."

Before she could say anything else, Blueblood's hooves shot out and gently smacked her unwelcome hoof away. The impact finally gave him the strength to open his eyes, revealing a pair of retinas that burned with all the heat of a thousand molten volcanoes. "He's not my father. I *am* Prince Blueblood."

For just a moment, it seemed like the entire world stopped spinning. Cadance's mind tried to laugh off the colt's ridiculous statement, but before her eyes, everything seemed to start becoming clearer. The colt's close resemblance to Blueblood, the weight of seriousness in his voice, and the power in his eyes all hinted at something she really, *really* didn't want to believe. "Wait...you mean...?"

Blueblood closed his eyes and nodded his head twice. "I'll explain everything..."

Princess Luna's hoof gently glided the new roster back to Shining Armor. "Very well, your proposal meets with both our approval. We will implement the new postings during the next rotation."

“And the increase in training time?” Shining asked. “After the combat evaluations, we really need to teach more than a few of these guys the difference between gripping a claymore and holding a longsword.”

If it weren't for the fact that these ponies were supposed to be the most elite in all of Equestria, Luna's response would have most likely risen beyond mere giggling. Celestia shared the same expression, although her own gaze never left her correspondence with the Griffon Kingdom. “Of course. And I think you should attend as well, Captain. We cannot allow the mighty pony leading our forces to start slacking off, now can we?”

Shining Armor blushed a little at Princess Luna's remarks. “W-Well...with your leave, I think I should be heading back to my quarters. I'm sure Cadance is...”

No sooner had that last sentence left Shining Armor's lips than an incredibly loud crash echoed throughout the study. All three ponies spun their heads about just in time to catch the first fiery snort to emerge from the *very* wrathful Princess Cadance's nostrils. In an instant, all warmth and love was drained from the room entirely, leaving the chamber little more than a cold, dusty tomb. “Um...I-Is something wrong, Cadance?” asked Shining Armor.

The mare slowly stomped her way into the study, her head remaining perfectly level, while her eyes seemed to burn with immeasurable power and intensity. She stopped only when she was at just the right range to poke one of her forehooves into Shining Armor's chest. “Leon came to my office just a little while ago.”

Celestia shifted about nervously, her hoof pulling at her necklace in a futile attempt to calm her own rankled nerves. “I...see...”

“He had the most *interesting* story,” Cadance continued. “It seems that Blueblood never *had* any foals. Instead, the pony you told me was Leon was actually *Blueblood* the whole time, kept under some kind of spell until he passed a test all of you set up!”

Shining Armor's face twisted into the most wonderfully awkward smile he could manage. He had seen Cadance upset before, but never truly *angry*. “W-Well...I...wanted to...”

“And you didn't think to tell me *any* of this?” Cadance's voice became raspier and raspier as she struggled to intone just the right words to express her rage. “I was there with him the entire time, for pony's sake! By Jove, you'd think my own *aunts* and *fiancé* would try to keep me from making an idiot of myself!”

“Y-You did no such thing,” said Shining Armor. “Look, I'm sorry things happened like this, but I-I didn't know how to tell you about Blueblood's condition. I didn't even know what was going on until I got back to the castle.”

Cadance's eyes turned back to Celestia. "So, your 'vacation' was just you getting turned into a filly? Why would you lie to me like that? I've seen enough bizarre things in this castle to believe something like *that*."

The Sun Princess recoiled in shock. In all the years she had been Cadance's caretaker, she had never heard the mare raise her voice to her in such a way. "I-It was a delicate situation! I couldn't allow anypony to..."

"To know it was my fault," said Luna. Cadance's dagger-like eyes turned to the Night Mare, somehow managing to scare even the pony who had helped take down Discord. "You see, I was...trying to get back at Princess Celestia for some...rather cruel practical jokes, and I believed that spell would be the perfect chance."

Shining Armor's own eyes widened at the admission. "Wait...you mean *you* did that? I thought it was some evil Unicorn!"

"I should have known." Cadance shook her head grimly. "But why did you make this all up? Why did you tell me that was Blueblood's son?"

A dreadful silence overtook the chamber, as nopony dared to open their mouths and incriminate themselves any further. Cadance's eyes shifted from one pony to the next, just daring them to give her something resembling a justification for this house of lies. Princess Luna twisted her lips inward, her face resembling a pony who had just bit into a raw lemon. Celestia levitated a pile of papers in front of her face, her telekinetic field holding them together in the most awkward manner possible. That left only Shining Armor, also known as the pony who had started this mess to begin with, to answer.

Sensing that his support had eroded, the Captain sighed and stepped forward. "Cadance, this is all my fault. I-I had missed you so much, and...after what you said in the garden...I-I was afraid that..."

Cadance raised one of her eyes, the other remaining perfectly slanted. "Wait...do you mean that...Shining, I was joking! I never thought something so...ludicrous could happen!" She took a few steps forward, her gaze never once breaking in its intensity. "Shining, I know you and Blueblood have had problems in the past, but what could possibly compel you to lie to me about something like this? I would have understood if you had just told me the truth."

Shining's cheeks burned like a scolded foal. "Look, Cadance, this doesn't..."

"I...I can't handle this right now," the mare whispered. "I-I need some time to think..."

Before anypony could utter so much as a single word, the mare turned on her hooves and

trotted out the door, her head hanging slack and swaying slightly with every step. None of the other ponies in attendance made any effort to stop her. In fact, none of them exactly felt right even talking to her at the moment, especially the pony she was set on marrying. Shining just readjusted his helmet and began walking towards the direction of the barracks.

After tonight, there was no way he would be welcome at home.

Atop one of the castle's walls, a tiny white colt simply sat and stared at the stars. It might have been well past his bedtime by this point, but he didn't particularly care. After a day like this, going to sleep would be as much of a dream as anything his unconscious mind could concoct. Besides, Princess Luna had done a wonderful job. Sparkling specks of light danced and shot across the black canopy, while the moon seemed to radiate with an almost unearthly brightness.

Blueblood was so entranced by the beautiful night sky that he didn't even notice Celestia approaching him until she was directly at his side. "It seems your confession had made a mess of things," she said with a sigh.

The colt's face fell. "I know. You could hear it clear through the castle." He grimaced slightly as that newfound feeling – guilt – gnawed away at his heart. "I'm sorry. I never meant to..."

"The fault is all ours," said Celestia. "None of us should have deceived Cadance in such a way." She sighed as she rested her forehooves against the parapets. "Still, with you as a foal..."

"I've changed my mind."

Celestia's ears perked up as she turned her head, just barely catching the colt in her point of view. "Pardon?"

"When we were at my old home, I...had a chance to think about what this would mean for me...my family...everything." The prince turned his own head, locking eyes with his aunt. "I don't like the pony I was anymore, but I am still Blueblood. Even if I never hold a title again, I was still raised to be a prince. Back then, it was just a way to get what I wanted without ever working for it, to make ponies desire me without putting forward any effort. But now I know that being a prince means more than just living on a big tract of land and making everypony kiss your hooves."

He sighed. "It means working for the benefit of everypony, not just yourself. I can't do that by upholding old traditions and behaving like an inconsiderate dunce to everypony I encounter, but neither can I do anything if I'm playing when I should be working."

The colt sniffed and wiped his eyes. "I want to stay like this. Here, I have friends who care about

me, ponies who respect me without knowing what my rank is, and no responsibilities to speak of. But I must do what is *right*, even if it isn't what I want. That's why...I have to go back. I have to answer for my crimes."

Celestia stared at the colt with a mixture of silence and sadness. "Just a short time ago, I was in the same position you are in right now. When Luna offered me the same choice, I had to perform a similar examination. I had thought I wanted to stay a filly, but once I realized how much I would be sacrificing, how many ponies I'd be abandoning for my own selfish desires, I knew I *wanted* to return."

She leaned over and gave the colt a small nuzzle. Blueblood's eyes briefly flashed with surprise at the sudden contact, but the smooth rubbing motions soon reduced his tension to something not dissimilar to clay. "I know you don't want to come back, but I respect your decision. However, you have one more thing you must do. There are some ponies you owe an explanation."

Blueblood nodded. His back was still facing towards Celestia. "Shouldn't we tell the school as well?"

"We can...sort that out later," Celestia murmured. "You don't want to know what I had to go through just to get the paperwork done the *first* time. In the meantime, there is something you must do tomorrow, before I can consent to returning you to your former self. You have to tell Lofty and the others what's going on."

The colt shuddered and buried his face even deeper into his forelegs. "You're right. I-I'll try to figure out something."

The scene fell quiet soon after, save for the occasional trotting of a passing guard and the clattering window in the cold breeze. The two ponies simply stared up at the night sky, taking in the twinkling spectacle Luna had provided for Equestria this night. Every star seemed to dance to and fro in the night sky, as if celebrating the end to this horrendous ordeal. It was several minutes before Blueblood spoke again. "Do you think I'm making the right decision?"

Celestia sighed, her smile slowly fading away as she answered. "I don't know. This whole situation is a mess. We still have to figure out how we'll explain Leon's disappearance, not to mention what happened to you in the meantime. But...yes, you're right that you cannot run away from your problems. Just stay strong, and soon, things will be all worked out."

The colt nodded and yawned. After a whole day of fighting, escaping, being judged, making one decision, backpedaling, and possibly ruining his cousin's future marriage, fatigue was refusing to let up. His entire body leaned into Celestia's, taking in the Sun Princess' warmth and drifting him off to sleep. *Things will work out...I hope.*

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