

"Father, I behaved poorly. Please forgive me." Sentinel, bowing his head, could not look his father in the eye. The young colt stared down into his coffee instead.

"Think nothing of it," Bucky replied. Feeling a wonderful mood, Bucky leaned over and touched his son on the neck. "What do you think is going to happen today?"

Sentinel's barrel heaved like a bellows as he drew in a deep breath, exhaled, sucked in another breath, held it, and then let out out a little at a time. His head rose, his nostrils sniffing as the steam rising from his coffee tickled them. "We both know how this ends."

"Sentinel, sometimes, son, sometimes, you get into something that you just can't win. Sacrifices must be made. It isn't giving up, or even giving in, it is about doing what needs to be done." Bucky lifted up his fork, cut off a triangle of pancakes, stabbed them, lifted them up, stuffed them into his mouth.

Sentinel scowled and shook his head, his ears flopping somewhat as his head jerked back and forth. He banged his hoof down upon the table, let out a fierce snarl, and then he began taking deep breaths once again, trying to regain his control.

"Sentinel, in life, you are going to find yourself in situations you have no control over. Plan for everything. Including failure." Bucky took another bite of pancakes and syrup dribbled down his chin and down upon his plate.

"I don't like failure!"

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"Hold still!" Berry Punch placed her hoof to the side of Bucky's face, her touch a gentle caress, and tried to make Bucky stay still while Lyra worked to secure the false eyelashes.

"Is it wrong that I am turned on by this?" Thistle asked.

"No... every mare should feel a little hot to trot as she's making her husband look pretty," Bon Bon replied. The earth pony mare leaned over and placed her muzzle near Bucky's. "Hey there you sweet little filly... you come here often?" Bon Bon's voice was a low sultry growl, husky, with just the right amount of aggression.

"Bon Bon... I'm going to knock you up for that." Bucky, trying to hold still, lost control of himself and started to laugh.

"We must gird our princess so that she might go into battle." Lyra went to work trying to secure the false eyelashes on the other side.

Bon Bon, tittering, having a wonderful time, looked at Bucky with half closed eyes. "I dunno, seeing you like this, I'm kinda in the mood to be knocked up."

There was a bright flash as Derpy took a picture. The grey mare moved around, her steps slow, and from a different angle, she snapped another photo.

"More pictures... I want to tell Bandua this story when she is older and I want her to see pictures." Belisama, armed with a spoon, slid some hot regurgitated food down Bandua's gullet.

"My adorable little fubby-wubby!" Bucky turned his head to look at Bandua and got pushed back into place by Berry Punch.

"Fubby-wubby?" Berry shook her head.

"Well, she's not a foal, she's not a cub, not really, even though the griffons call her that. She's my fub." Bucky's eyes strained to look sideways so he could see his daughter.

Berry Punch cocked her head and looked at Bandua for a moment and then she looked back at her husband, whom she had to admit, was starting to look pretty. At least, what passed for pretty as far as Bucky was concerned. "And to think I carry your foals in my belly."

Derpy snapped a picture of Bandua, smiled, and then nodding her head, she made a gesture to Bon Bon as her eyes darted towards Thistle.

Bon Bon, being an earth pony, sensed the unspoken commands of the wily pegasus. Reaching out one well muscled foreleg, with shocking swiftness, she flipped Thistle's tail up, revealing everything there was to see.

There was a flash of a camera.

"Eeep!" Thistle squeaked as she swished her tail and tried to cover herself. Her cheeks darkened, like red wine spilled on a light coloured carpet. She turned to look at Derpy and Bon Bon. Flustered, the kelpie said nothing, her blush intensifying as she stood there.

"One kelpie plot. Now I'll have something nice to look at while I rub one out in the bathtub." Derpy's eyebrows flapped up and down like bird's wings and she gave Thistle a saucy wink.

"Just think," Lyra said as she daubed a bit of mascara on Bucky. "We're going to look back on this moment, look at these pictures, and we're going to remember this as a happy time in our lives. The pain of the bad news I got will fade in time, the trivial events of today might be forgotten, but this... all of this that we are doing right now, all of this will be remembered."

“A group of wives—”

“A group of best friends,” Derpy said, interrupting Berry Punch, who had started speaking. Derpy reached out and patted Berry on the back with her wing.

“A group of wives who are best friends, all of us sharing this moment with our husband.”

“I couldn’t imagine life without all of you,” Thistle said, echoing Berry’s sentiment.

“Don’t make Bucky cry, his mascara will run,” Lyra said, offering a warning.

The mares and the griffoness all began to giggle.

“We need to tie that green gauze around Bucky’s bandages... it was so thoughtful of Rarity to include that,” Bon Bon said as she reached up and wiped her eye.

“Now we need to get our husband to Ponyville for the meeting with the princesses.” Lyra stepped back to admire her work. Nodding, feeling satisfied, she stepped forwards and pressed her snout into Bucky’s.

Nibbling on Bucky’s lip with her own, Lyra coaxed him into opening his mouth. Her knees felt wobbly as her tongue flicked out, seeking his, and she could feel the lumpy bumps of the roof of his mouth for a moment. She closed her eyes, leaned in a little more, and could feel delightful suction tugging on her lips. The tip of her tongue trailed over the broad flat surface of Bucky’s tongue.

With a slurp, Lyra pulled away, opened her eyes, and stared into Bucky’s. She didn’t see that they were mismatched. She didn’t notice the Taint. The eyes were the window to the soul. Looking at Bucky, looking into Bucky, Lyra could feel her heart thudding in her barrel.

“Thank you for Harper...”

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The town of Ponyville gathered to look upon the flock of alicorns, there to see the pretty pony princesses. Princess Celestia, tall, regal, stood upon the wooden podium constructed for this event. She waved to the crowd. The noble white alicorn was wearing a silken gown that was a subdued shade of soft pink, trimmed in yellow, with a few orange accents.

Beside her stood Princess Luna, wearing a black gown that was covered in sequins. It was sleek, almost scandalous. Princess Luna strutted around, knowing that she looked [i]good.[/i]

Princess Twilight Sparkle, even though she was not participating, had still dressed up for the event, wearing something in a shade of sunny yellow. It was simple, not at all flashy, and Twilight's stunning beauty was enhanced by simplicity of her gown.

For all of Celestia's radiance, for all of Luna's ravaging sex appeal, for all of Twilight's simple, graceful beauty, it could not compete with the grotesquerie of Princess Buckminster Bitters.

Wearing his olive gown, Bucky waved at the crowd, his shyness only adding to the awkwardness of the moment. The other princesses, refined, well mannered, cultured, acted as though nothing was wrong, nothing was out of place.

Bucky's long flowing mane was now done up in a bouffant and tied off with ribbons.

The overall effect could only be described as nauseating.

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"Nephew... I must say, the overall effect... is stunning." Princess Celestia was stony faced as she looked Bucky over.

"You are the tiniest, most adorable little princess ever," Princess Luna said to Princess Buckminster Bitters, her voice filled with insufferable smugness. She towered over Bucky and gloated, using her full height to her advantage.

Princess Twilight Sparkle lifted up a somewhat chubby pink alicorn foal that was bundled up for the weather. "No, that title belongs to Cadance."

Turning away from Princess Luna, Princess Buckminster Bitters looked at the crowd. "I had my gown made by the lovely Rarity and the graceful Coco, right here in Ponyville at the Carousel Boutique. These two mares can work miracles... I mean, look at this fabulous gown!"

A few ponies in the crowd cheered, but the overall effect of the silence was almost deafening. More cameras flashed.

Princess Celestia cleared her throat and lifted her head high. "A very charitable action was held for one hundred coveted spots, a chance to meet with us up here on stage."

"Yes, we wanted to thank you for your kindness." Princess Luna ceased to smile and looked very serious. "The Lunar Court wishes to double your generosity. We are matching the funds raised for this occasion, matching them bit for bit. The Lunar Court humbly thanks you for your kindness to those who have little or nothing."

Princess Celestia smiled at her sister. "The Solar Court could do no less."

"Huzzah! The funds have been tripled!" Princess Luna's voice carried over the murmur of the crowd.

"Please, form organised lines, no pushing, no shoving, the guard will be checking you for your tickets as you approach. Have them ready," a pegasus in gold armor barked.

Looking out at the crowd, Bucky saw that the line for Celestia was enormous already. Out of the hundred spots auctioned off, Princess Celestia had the lion's share. Most of the ponies in the line were unicorns. In the line to meet Princess Luna, there were a few pegasi and few unicorns, military types with hard faces, scars, and flinty looks.

Princess Twilight Sparkle's line was surprising, there were a fair number of ponies waiting, and almost all of them were pegasi. Glancing at Twilight, Bucky could see the shock and surprise upon her face. In the days of Ponyville's independence, Twilight Sparkle had endeared herself to the common pegasi, and now the flock of Ponyville and the pegasi of Equestria were loyal to her.

Some might even say their loyalty was almost fanatical.

With a sinking feeling, Bucky realised there was no line to see him. Remaining gracious, he kept his head high and a smile upon his face. There was no point in being a sore loser about this, but it stung.

A unicorn guard stepped forward. "Somepony to see you... sir?"

Princess Buckminster Bitters snickered and felt surprised. The unicorn stepped aside and a little earth pony filly stepped forward. She was carrying a flower in her mouth. She looked up at Bucky with wide adoring eyes.

Bucky lowered his head and took the offered flower in his magic. He slid it into a frill of his gown, adjusted it a bit, and then looked down at the filly.

"My name is Royal Blue. We earth ponies took up a collection to have enough bits to win a spot in the auction and I was selected to give you that flower. My mommy grew it in her greenhouse."

A lump appeared in Bucky's throat. He tried clearing his throat, but the lump persisted.

"We earth ponies wanted to thank you," Royal Blue said in a squeaky voice.

"Thank you... thank you so very much, you have just made my day," Bucky replied.

“You look after the least of us, and we love you for it. My papa told me to tell you that.”

Bucky feared his mascara would run. He understood now why mares were so afraid of it happening. “I do my best.” Bucky wanted to say more, but had no idea what to say. He looked into the crowd and saw the earth ponies of Ponyville. Farmers. Labourers. Hard working sorts. There were quite a number of Apples present.

In the crowd, Coco was visible. She had a flower identical to his own tucked into the collar of her coat. Looking around, Bucky saw a number of flowers very much like his own, all of them on earth ponies.

He looked down at Royal Blue. “This means an awful lot to me, thank you.”

The filly made a gesture with her hoof, trying to get Bucky to lower his head. He did so. He stood, almost snoot to snoot with her. “I was told to make our bits count,” she said in a soft scared voice. Her legs trembled.

Stretching out her neck, Royal Blue kissed Bucky on the cheek and then backed away. “Thank you... we hope you think fondly of us. My mommy told me to say that.”

Lifting his head, he watched the filly go, turning and running. She ran to a mare and a stallion who stood nearby, both of them were smiling. The mare lifted a hoof and waved. Bucky lifted up his bandaged leg and waved back.

Bucky knew what the day held for him, but he didn't care. What he felt right now felt a lot like victory.