



The Best Night Ever

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Chapter 1

Unmitigated.

Unprecedented.

Unabashed.

Unsalvageable.

Disaster.

The Gala was a *disaster*.

It was, Prince Blueblood reflected as he dragged himself to bed, "Truly, the worst night ever."

Collapsing face first into the pillows, his body shook with a resounding sigh.

At least it was over.

"You'll be seeing Rain Booms!

Ooo-ooo-oooh!

Equestrian Girls, we're kinda magical!

Boots on hooves, bikinis on top!"

An alabaster hoof silenced the infernal electronic device transmitting its unbearable pop-culture sugar-sweet ear pollution. Sapphire Shores. He *hated* Sapphire Shores. What was the radio even doing on that station again?

Blueblood found himself on his back, eyes bleary but open, staring up at the delicately tiled ceiling. The damnable machine had done its job and woken him up, at least. Pulling his regal and 'royal' self upright, he gently massaged a hoof into his forehead, willing himself to deal with the post-Gala fiasco he had abandoned last night. Celestia's Triumph, celebrating the glorious founding of Canterlot, overrun by a horde of crazed critters.

Rolling out of bed, he paused only to glance outside at the lush palace gardens and then to ring a bell to summon the Palace grooming staff for his morning routine. It most certainly would not do to arrive at breakfast in a disheveled state. An antechamber served this purpose well, and a pair of unicorn mares quickly arrived to groom away the night's frustrations and prepare him for the supposedly casual meeting he had with his Aunts. Blueblood closed his eyes, not needing to see the servants to gauge their work. They had been doing this for years, after all, just as he had: the same thing, day after day.

Similarly, he resisted the impulse to doze off.

No: his thoughts turned to the ruined Gala. Specifically to the foalish mare who had so showered him with low class cake, and then to the cascade of destruction that had turned the noble M nagerie Ursae into a house of cards. Compared to the structural and artistic destruction, the stampede of wild animals that followed was really almost an afterthought: an insulting addendum to the devastation. The Royal Guards had mysteriously disappeared soon after, leaving dazed and confused nobleponies and guests of honor to stagger around, lost and confused, unable to process the fact that their evening had been so thoroughly ransacked. A tribe of savage griffins could as well have walked through, plucking tapestries from the walls and jewels from the necks of aristocrats, and not a single pony would have batted an eye.

Something would have to be done to mitigate the aftermath. Blueblood mentally prepared to meet with the Royal Bouteiller, as soon after breakfast as possible. The image of the Gala needed to be repaired - his precious image as well, of course - which meant that they needed a patsy. Yes. A public face to blame the disaster on. The social circles of Canterlot would do the rest, if given only a rumor or two.

No royal hooves would need to be involved. The question was who to string up? It needed to be someone believable but also someone already unpopular. The noble families had to subconsciously want to blame this pony, or these ponies, beforehoof. He would have found a pyrrhic pleasure in pinning it on his would-be date for the evening, but no one cared about a mare from Ponyville. One didn't bait a tiger with cheese.

Dismissing the two groomers with a haughty wave of his hoof, Prince Blueblood glanced for a moment at the nearby full-body mirror. He looked fine. None the worse for wear, despite last night. The bump on the back of his head had even disappeared. How fortuitous!

Now, for his attire.

Opening the walk-in dressing closet, he saw his shortened dinner jacket and blue bow tie, hanging waiting for him, pressed and prepared. It had been left in a place of honor, with the expectation that he would come for it later tonight. The Prince's expression darkened immediately. What was that doing there? Granted, he had many dinner jackets, but he had ordered this one from Hoity specifically for the Gala.

Last night's Gala.

"Idiots," he grumbled, pushing aside the formal wear for a pale silk collar. "I am surrounded by foals and idiots."

The living quarters of the Palace opened up to him, but the Guard only became noticeable as he approached the pantry and dining hall. Truth be told, the Prince was in little mood to see his beloved aunt, not after her pointed disappearance last night had sounded the death knell for what should have been the most magnificent night of the year. He had personally invested much in the entire affair, bringing together select patrons of the arts and arcane who had sought him out as their patron. Now those guests were humiliated and no doubt silently enraged at the farce the night had become.

Lost in his thoughts, paying little heed to his surroundings, Blueblood sat before the table hosted by his exalted Princess-aunt. In fact, both of his great aunts were in attendance, a somewhat rare occurrence. Twice in as many days. Blueblood didn't remember the last time that had happened, but he didn't let it distract him from his sullen displeasure. It was an impotent displeasure as well, for Celestia damn well did as she pleased, and there was little anypony could or would say or do about it.

The Princess of the Sun sat at the head of the table, cheerfully and contentedly munching on low class oats and apples. *Again.* Luna had finished eating what was actually and effectively her dinner, and remained quietly lost in introspection. She often partook of a glass of wine before

going to sleep for the day, a rather strange custom though Blueblood recognized the vintage of the bottle kept cool by her place on the table (the same as yesterday). A true creature of the night, that one. Not that it was any business of his what she did with herself.

Blueblood placed an order for tea, with milk and ginger, and freshly imported yucca.

Waiting for it to arrive, he pondered how he could possibly chide his immortal and all powerful relative without actually sticking his hoof into the proverbial fire. She looked so irrepressibly yet silently smug about something this morning, like she had some plan or another that she expected to pan out. The last year had been just one thing after another, and Blueblood had come to associate his aunt's good morning moods with some trouble or another looming appropriately on the horizon.

"Prince Blueblood," a cultured voice interrupted the noblepony's thoughts.

"Proper Place," the Prince greeted the Royal Chamberlain, and officer of the Household. The elderly unicorn was just finishing his meal, and shadowed by his ever present assistant, the Keeper of Seals. Not that Blueblood remembered that pony's name.

"I trust you are looking forward to this Evening's Gala?" the elderly pony inquired. "I have heard you hired from the Canterlot Chamber Orchestra company? I look forward to their rendition of Entry of the Princess in Sun's Light."

Blueblood opened his mouth to agree, when he caught what was being said - besides the compliment.

"W-what?" he asked, dumbly, and quickly shook his head. "What was that just now?"

"The Gala, Prince," Proper Place repeated. "I look forward to it."

Instantly suspicious of some sort of joke or trick - the likes of which his dear aunt had become quite fond recently - Blueblood glanced back around the room. Sure enough, nopony seemed to be deriving any perverse enjoyment from the conversation, nor were they even interested. It took a moment to settle in, but it quickly became clear that all the ponies in

attendance were eating and seated at the exact same places as yesterday. It was normal, really, but also gave him the strangest bit of *deja vu*. Even this conversation with Proper Place... hadn't they had it yesterday?

"Of course," Blueblood settled on saying, still a bit weary of some further joke at his expense.

He glanced at Celestia once Proper Place finished and excused himself, but aside from whispering something to Luna, the godlike Princess hardly seemed interested at all. She was a good actor, to be sure, and could simply be planning some larger joke.

Yet it seemed both uncharacteristically rude and mean spirited to not only effectively facilitate the ruin of the Gala, but then to rub his face in it the next day. It was a celebration in honor of her, after all, and in how she had founded Canterlot. She was the Sun and the Center of their world. His participation was an effort to demonstrate the depth of his affection and admiration for her... while, yes, also furthering the political game of which the lesser, mortal Royal family was a part.

He wanted to speak - to demand to know if something was afoot - but cowed, dared not to.

Instead, he determined not to play along. If Celestia had set things up to mimic the day before, then so be it. It seemed strange that *Proper Place* of all ponies would play along, but Prince Blueblood would not.

He would stay in.

Night came, and Blueblood just couldn't believe what was before his eyes.

It was the Gala.

The bloody, damned Gala from the night before.

"What in the starless Hells...?" the curse was muttered silently as he peeked out the window, observing the procession of guests arriving at the castle. It couldn't be -

It just... couldn't!

And yet, there it was! *There is was!*

There was even some sort of curious impromptu musical number breaking out before the castle gates. That was... odd... but such things happened in Equestria from time to time, or so he had heard. Having sequestered himself away all day to catch up on his duties as Grand Veneur (as pointless and powerless as that title really was), he had purposefully avoided any chattering or rumoring of the "Gala prank" he had been certain was being planned at his expense.

He had even thought of it as a gay little game: he would overhear some servant talking about the "Gala tonight" and it would be an exercise in self-restraint to keep from correcting or disciplining the little pawn. The Gala was yesterday. It was *over*, and it had been a *flop*.

Blueblood had even waited patiently for the angry and shocked letters of those who had sought his patronage, now demanding he do something about the debacle - as if there was anything much he could do except to help assign blame, and direct it as much as possible away from himself. Yet no letters came. No word of insulted nobles demanding to see him. No nothing!

Just like...

Princess and gods... just like yesterday, when he had expressly cleared the entire day's schedule!

Suspiciously watching as the musical number outside died down, the Wonderbolts themselves beginning their scheduled performance, Blueblood felt a cold shiver run down his spine. Aside from his actually getting some work done formally approving yet another minor expansion to the borders of Everfree, the entire day was a spot on ringer for the day before. Now there was even a faux Gala underway!

Madness!

"Lord Prince!" The gentle rapping on the door of his study would no doubt have caused the frayed Royal to jump out of his cummerbund, had he been wearing one. "Lord Prince! The Princess has inquired as to your presence at the Gala!"

"She - she has?" Blueblood's rump hit a desk, scattering scrolls and maps onto the floor.

"Yes, Lord!" the voice called, but didn't dare to barge in when unwelcome. "Are you well enough to attend?"

"I... yes," he decided, and raised his voice to be heard. "Yes, I will attend."

Pressing an ear up to the study door, he waited for the sound of hoofsteps to die down before opening the door. This was all... simply too strange. Too bizarre.

Yet, rote and routine called to him. He descended down to the Royal apartments and summoned his preferred servants. Quietly, stunned that he was going along with what had to be an insane prank of some kind, Blueblood went through the motions of being washed, groomed one last time, and finally fitted into his custom Hoity dinner suit. At last, one of the nameless chamber fillies presented him with his reflection in a mirror. He looked perfect, of course. Just perfect. Simply perfect.

The same as yesterday.

Late to the Gala now, he endured the heralds announcing his arrival in the Grand Oratory. Normally, this would be a moment to relish: to stand before his peers (and peers aspirant) and the cream of society and aristocracy. To have them look up and measure his presence as he descended to join them. Princesses knew he had savored the moment yesterday, intending to play coy for a time before he formally began to mingle. It was all a great display, after all.

The repeat performance, however, filled him with unfamiliar unease and quickly concealed anxiety and confusion. He tried to remember what faces he had seen and recognized yesterday when he had been announced, but this was different than before. He wasn't arriving at the right time - the same time - and he saw some ponies missing and some extras present.

One in particular.

He ignored her for a moment, and saw Celestia at the intersection of the stairs leading from the Oratory to the Ménagerie, the three wings of the Palace where the Gala proper was being held. Next to the regal Princess

was a petite purple unicorn in a blue dress covered in five-pointed stars. It took Blueblood a moment to remember and realize that she had to be the "bright student" his aunt often waxed on about. Usually in comparison to himself. *Twilight Sparkle*, if he recalled the name. The mare who was, he had been told, both a magical prodigy and most certainly not a layabout who would shirk her responsibilities to take a trip to the Clopogos (as if he did that every year, instead of once in his entire life).

There, too, was the Master of Rivers with his wife, and the High Steward of the Stables!

And... then there was *her*.

Just as he remembered her from yesterday. Which was much like today. She was a beauty to look at, to be sure: pristine white coat, vivid violet mane with a distinctive and feminine curl, actual crystal slippers and an intricate, layered dress in shades of red and gold. And - yes - she was looking at him with that exact same expression he had noticed at the other Gala. The... same Gala? Wide eyed, like she had found the Prince of her dreams. He felt the cruel temptation then that he had before, but quashed it. Something was going on.

Blueblood screwed his eyes shut, and made a bee-line for Celestia.

This couldn't be a game. This couldn't be a trick.

That meant magic.

"Ah, Prince Blueblood!" Celestia greeted him with a wfront leg, welcoming smile. One that reminded him of when he was just a foal, and she had found him wandering about her garden outside. "I'm happy to see you could make it. I was a bit worried when I heard you'd been in your study all day."

The implication being: *it isn't like you*.

"Yes, well," he stammered slightly, trying to think up an excuse. "There were matters that needed immediate attention." He quickly bowed his head in a public show of respect and deference. "Princess."

Celestia's smile was gracious, and as usual, she tried to skip through the formality.

"This is my student, Twilight Sparkle." She inclined her head towards the young unicorn mare. A little tentatively, Twilight extended her hoof.

"Charmed," Blueblood said, taking her hoof and favoring the filly with a suave grin. His body and mouth were mostly working on automatic at this point. He needed to pull his Aunt aside! "I've heard so very much about you, Miss Sparkle."

"Um. Likewise?" She clearly phrased it as a question.

Not too much for social niceties, it seemed. Well, Celestia had painted her as a mare of magic and diligent academic study. Not that she mattered at the moment.

"Princess," he didn't dare cause a scene by calling her 'Auntie' anywhere near prying ears. "I have a bit of a problem I'd like to speak with you about..." he then added, leadingly, "In private?"

"Nephew," Celestia didn't have the same qualms, and her tone was just hinting as reproachful. "Whatever it is, surely it can wait until later, after all the guests have arrived. Tonight is a very special night; let's not ruin it with work. Just mingle a little and enjoy yourself."

"But..." he tried to inject a little pleading into his voice.

"Later. I promise." Celestia put her hoof down, and he became silent. She shooed him off like a disobedient child. "Go. Have fun."

'Damn it!'

"Of course," he acquiesced immediately, lowering his head. "Perhaps later."

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that insufferable unicorn watching him. Her eyes were intelligent and calculating, now, and not quite so blinded by awe and infatuation as before. All too cognizant of what had happened ...the last time, Blueblood gave one last farewell to the Princess' little apprentice and retreated to the Ménagerie.

A certain measure of sloth aside, Princess Blueblood was not a foal. Nor was he ignorant of the magic that was his birthright. There was something truly strange going on. This meant that it was best to observe, for the moment, so as to formulate a proper response. What happened before (and he felt a little sick thinking of things in this kind of weird "loop") surely couldn't and wouldn't repeat itself if he just removed himself from the picture. Perhaps doing so would also reveal some clue? Perhaps doing so would just fix things by chance!

The latter was realistically his best bet.

The Ménagerie was a series of prominent rooms and adjoining salons. Each of the main chambers was named for a prominent constellation, the very same one that adorned the ceiling of each hall in the form of a great mural. Facing North was the Bear, East the Scorpion, and West the Hound. Within each individual Ménagerie, the walls were decked in the finest tapestries and frescoes, the most elegant of marble statues were on display, and stain-glass windows provided a rich ambiance.

Blueblood mingled in the loosest sense of the word.

Autopilot.

His body switched to autopilot, doing at it had been trained to do. He hardly spared a thought for the mares and gentlecolts he exchanged empty greetings and idle chitchat with. He was looking for anything particularly strange. There had to be something a-hoof with this situation. He also did his best to seem occupied and keep that one unicorn mare from getting involved. There was no time to waste with her.

In the Northern Ménagerie Ursae, one of the guests seemed to be causing a scene up on stage. The perpetrator was a neon-pink mare whose legs seemed to have been replaced with springs. As gauche and out of place as that one seemed to be, there wasn't any overtly offensive magic about her. Plus, just how could an Earth pony be involved in anything like... this... whatever *this* was?

The Prince moved on to check on the Eastern Ménagerie Scorpius. The smell of the grand banquet was alluring, but Blueblood found his royal appetite blunted by the uncertainty of the situation. The eastern quarter of the Gala, like the west, was partly open air and bordered the most public

section of the gardens. The view of the night sky was particularly striking here, and sections of the colonnade had been prepared to allow guests to sit on the grass and relax while they ate.

Everything seemed normal on this front, though as he made a more thorough look around, Blueblood noticed that peculiar food vendor he had visited yesterday. *IF...* yesterday had been real? Either way, it and she were there now, exactly where they had been before. He snorted to himself at the common fare on display. It wasn't even a matter of price - the banquet being free - no noble pony with a sense of decorum would be seen indulging in such plebian fare. It was shocking even to contemplate and remember that he, Blueblood, had paid so little attention to his surroundings that he had partaken of such things.

Luckily, no one seemed to remember about that "other day" except him.

Satisfied there was nothing sinister going on, he elected to investigate the Western Ménagerie Canis. This area was quite popular, as it included the VIP Wonderbolts section of the party. It also had a very well stocked bar. Yet, here, too, everything seemed normal. Ponies were chatting and enjoying themselves. That puddle on the floor was still present as well. Really, were the staff slacking or what? Inexcusable. Yet it was beneath him to remand one of them while the party was in full swing. He would have seen to it tomorrow... but there could well be no tomorrow!

It was soon after all this that the commotion began.

There was a shout, a crash from the Ménagerie Ursae, and a mad rush of critters of all shapes and sizes. A frightened buzzard swooped low, forcing Blueblood to throw himself to the floor. Yes: this. This was what had really driven home the end of the Gala. Once again, the Palace Guard were all gone. Once again, there was a sound of breaking statuary and the panicked bemoaning of guests as they rushed, pell-mell, from the crazed animal horde. Once again, auntie had disappeared.

For a second time, the Gala was ruined.

Yet, as he dusted himself off, Blueblood found himself watching the surroundings with a strange calm; a certain detachment. He had seen it all before. The surprise was gone. Yet... he wasn't resigned, either. He was curious, confused, perplexed. It was like watching a painting being made,

knowing already what it will look like. The fascination was in the technique, not so much the end result.

In an apathetic daze, he quietly retired to his room in the Royal Apartments.

*"You'll be seeing Rain Booms!
Ooo-ooo-oooh!
Equestrian Girls, we're kinda magical!
Boots on hooves, bikinis on top!"*

A hoof reached for the gilded gold and silver radio, fumbling for a moment, before turning it off.

Blue eyes opened, wearily. Blueblood inhaled, exhaled, and sat up in bed. He looked down and saw the same sheets. He was even waking up in the same position. The song from a moment before still crawled unwanted in his ears, echoing in the sleepy morning lucidity of his brain.

Sliding out of bed, he took a moment to look outside. The Grand Gardens stretched out below, and he could see the old groundskeeper already up and working checking and fixing the hedge rows. It was a beautiful morning, and the risen sun was shining brightly on another glorious day in Canterlot.

Another... glorious... day...

Ring the same bell to summon the same servants, Blueblood began his morning routine. It just... wouldn't do... to arrive at breakfast looking disheveled. He was the Prince, after all. The one member of the Royal family who wasn't immortal. The one member of the family who couldn't command the sun and the moon. He had powers of his own, yes, but they were not the sort that would wow or inspire the masses of Equestria, peasant and noble alike. At the least, he could do what little he did while looking good.

On a lark, he spoke to the servant fillies this morning.

"The Gala is tonight," he stated it with a sigh. "Isn't it?"

The two mares exchanged surprised and unsure looks. They weren't used to conversation with him, and perhaps wondered if it meant trouble. A second or two of silence followed before one of them dared to answer: a light blue filly with soft red mane.

"Yes, my Prince," she hesitantly replied.

"How nice," he said it without emotion, and held up his right hoof.
"Continue."

Like before, but not quite like before, he hardly paid attention as they finished with him. Soon he was presentable, and dressed, and ready for breakfast. The castle was the same as always... except now, it was the *same* as *always*. Blueblood felt a shiver run through his frame as he entered the dining hall, and saw everyone just where they were before. Eating the same things as before. Chatting about the same things as before.

He blinked, hard, and felt a rush of relief as he realized: Celestia was here. Now. He would ask her now! Well. Not quite now. He didn't want to make a scene. Soon. Very soon.

A servant came by, and he placed an order for tea, with milk and ginger. A dish of freshly imported yucca. It was tasty in and of itself, but it was refined and expensive. He had been hoping to start a trend with it. He also had a *cliens* doing business in the plant. There was that, too, but it also brought back pleasant memories.

"Prince Blueblood," a cultured voice spoke up. Just like before. And the time before that.

"Proper Place," the Prince greeted the Royal Chamberlain, and officer of the Household. He was present with his aide. Neither of them had the faintest idea that Blueblood already knew that the esteemed unicorn was about to say.

"I trust you are looking forward to this Evening's Gala? I have heard you hired from the Canterlot Chamber Orchestra company? I look forward to their rendition of Entry of the Princess in Sun's Light."

"It should be quite fitting," he replied, glancing across the long table. "Once the Princess shows up, and if nothing goes wrong before that."

Strangely, Princess Celestia choose that moment to cover a small smile with a sip of tea, one of her ears twitching.

'Ah-ha!' Blueblood wanted to yell. 'Either you know what's going on, or you planned that mischief in the first place! Ah-bloody-ha!'

Naturally, he said not a word of it.

Instead, he listened quietly at the conversations around him. Normally, he just tuned it out, only paying attention if it was something immediately or obviously important. This time he really listened. Of particular note was what Celestia and Luna were whispering about... though it was mostly the former whispering and the latter listening. Eventually, Luna finished her drink, and her dinner, and excused herself to rest for the day.

Blueblood took that opportunity to speak up.

"Auntie," he said, comfortable using the word here among the Household and servants. "I would like to have a moment of your time, if I may?"

The serene Princess was unreadable and affable. As usual. "Of course, nephew. What seems to be the matter?"

He coughed politely. "I would rather discuss it in private, if I may."

"You may," she permitted. Which meant, not now, but quite soon. Blueblood waited and listened.

And prayed.

"So, if I understand you correctly," Celestia said, craning her neck in bemusement. "You are repeating the same day, starting from when you wake up?"

"Yes," Blueblood replied, blushing a little at how silly his story sounded.

Fortunately, it was just the two of them, alone in her sitting room. It was among the most elegant of apartments in the Palace, as befitting the Princess of the Sun. It was here that she entertained private guests, heads of state, ambassadors, and other ponies and personages of high honor and status. The entire room seemed to give off a soft, gentle glow. Celestia was not one for finery in the strictest sense of the word. Instead, or at least for the last few centuries, her preference had been for a simple, dignified, yet majestic aesthetic.

"And ending after you go to sleep after the Gala?"

"Yes."

The regal alicorn raised a wing to briefly cover her smile. "And no one realizes this except for you?"

"Again," Blueblood replied. "Yes."

Celestia gave a thoughtful 'hmm' sound as she pondered his words and his situation.

"I must say, my sweet little nephew..." Blueblood's heart leapt at the assurance that his all knowing aunt had the answer to this problem - like all problems. She gave him a serious look. "I just don't see where this joke is headed."

Blueblood's face fell and he nearly collapsed forward into his hooves.

"This is no prank!" he actually raised his voice. Just a little. "Auntie, please," he lowered his head, all but groveling. "I'm not playing a joke. I'm being serious."

"Nephew," Celestia began, and gently lifted his eyes with her hoof under his chin. "You're clearly distraught, but no magic on Equestria could have the effect you describe. Even Discord himself couldn't cast such a spell." Her eyes narrowed for a fraction of a second. "Probably."

"The Gala will be a disaster!" he vowed, looking up at her and willing her to believe him.

"Really?"

"Oh yes," he warned. "Cakes will fly and animals will run rampant! You'll disappear and... and..."

He deflated.

"And it'll all just be ruined," he finished, not even knowing all that went wrong with the Gala and how. Even with him avoiding that unicorn, things had gone downhill. And Celestia - his great aunt Celestia - didn't seem to care.

Blueblood hung his head in defeat.

"And you probably already knew that," he realized.

"You give me too much credit," the Princess of the Sun cooed gleefully. "The fun in life is not knowing what's going to happen. The wisest of ponies relish a little nonsense now and then." Still, her good mood did falter a bit. "But I'm surprised. How did you know...?"

"I've seen it happen," he answered with a frown. "Twice."

For a few pregnant seconds, the two Royals - alicorn and unicorn - sat in silence.

"Nephew," Celestia finally said, placing a compassionate hoof on his shoulder. "You are free to search the Royal Libraries for an answer, but I think the problem isn't with magic. The problem..." she tapped his chest. "Is in here."

"Or maybe here," she added, gently rapping her hoof against his forehead. "Perhaps you should see a specialist?"

For the second time, Blueblood's spirits sunk, and this time they took his face with it as he planted into the cushions on the floor. "Auntie!"

Celestia's personal physician and apothecary, Willow Bark, was a learned and much esteemed graduate of her School for Gifted Unicorns. She had a remarkable penchant for all forms of medicine, traditional, holistic, and magical. Blueblood watched her back as she stared at a series of arcane sigils that had materialized on sheets of paper. This sort of magic, he didn't

understand himself. He just hoped that whatever Willow saw, it was something useful, good or bad.

"I see," the pale coated unicorn mare muttered, her hoof rubbing absently against the pocket of her lab coat. "I see..."

"Well?" Blueblood snapped, growing impatient just sitting on place within the circle of runes and salt. "What do you see? What's wrong with me? Is it parasites? OH GODS IT'S PARASITES! They're in my brain, aren't they?"

"No. No. Not parasites." Willow Bark assured him, finally turning around to look him in the eye. "Nor is it lesions, contusions, concussions or infractions. You are in perfect health, Prince Blueblood."

"Then what did you see, you see?" he repeated, impatience making him rude. Ruder. Or at least snarkier.

"I see that you have not had your wisdom teeth removed!" Willow exclaimed. "May I schedule you for next week? Next month?"

"NO!"

"Are you sure a zebra hasn't cursed you?"

"Quite certain one hasn't," Blueblood answered, left eye twitching.

"Well, sir, I can't detect even a hint of magic on you, harmful or otherwise." The response came not from a physician, but from one of Blueblood's own trusted subordinates. Not without his own resources, he had immediately left the castle and called together - by fiat and demand - every learned scholar in his employ he could find. Unfortunately, most "learned scholars" under his employ were versed in magic rather unrelated to pony physiology or psychology.

Hence why Blueblood currently sat, wet and miserable, in a tub of magic-suppressing water, with an enchanted blinder and cap preventing use of his horn. He was personally de-enchanted in every way possible. There wasn't a shred of magic left that wasn't his own natural energy field. A beeping machine of strange Earth Pony construction whirred and hissed and vomited out a ream of paper covered with scratched lines.

"I want you to be sure!" the demand came from a Prince of Equestria.

Blueblood's underling just quirked an eyebrow. "We've done all we can to make you magically neutral, sir."

"I'm not moving a damn inch."

"Um. But... sir... what about the Gala?"

"The Gala can go straight to-"

*"You'll be seeing Rain Booms!
Ooo-ooo-oooh!
Equestrian Girls, we're kinda magical!
Boots on hooves, bikinis on top!"*

click.

Blueblood forced himself out of bed with a long, slow sigh.

Well.

That hadn't worked.

Outside was the same as before. Another beautiful early morning. Inside was the same as before. The chime of the bell to summon his servants sunk a pit into the Prince's royal stomach. The pair met him in the antechamber, and just like before, they helped him get groomed and dressed for the day. One couldn't simply attend breakfast looking like a damned slob, after all.

Eyes open, he watched the two chamber maids for once.

"The Gala is tonight," he asked, directing the question at neither of them in particular. "Isn't it?"

The two mares exchanged looks. Just like before. Blueblood noticed one looked particularly nervous, while the other seemed mostly surprised. It was the latter filly who eventually replied: the light blue mare with the pinkish-red mane.

"Yes, my Prince."

"How very nice," he groaned, and peered more closely at the filly. Normally he wouldn't have cared, but since he was talking to her anyway, he couldn't help but be a little curious. "What's your name?"

"Light Touch, sir." She bowed her head respectfully.

"And you?" he asked the other mare, the unicorn filly with a dark brown coat and straw colored mane. She lowered her eyes and dipped her head. "Speak up already," he commanded.

"Excuse her," Light Touch interrupted, trying to still sound deferential. "She doesn't talk much. Her name's Sandy."

"Wonderful," he deadpanned. "Well, may as well get me ready for my big, wonderful Gala Day."

"Announcing, his Highness, Prince of Equestria and Grand Veneur, Lord Blueblood of the House Blueblood."

This time, he went to the Gala.

Why, he wasn't even sure. Not that it mattered, but he went anyway.

He didn't try to avoid *her*, either.

In fact, after taking note of the musical number at the castle gates, he waited in the Royal Oratory, chatting with two businessponies from Manehattan. One eye on the clock, he took note of when she entered the room, looking about at the many noble personages with a mixture of nervousness and self-confidence. She was clearly certain she could fit in if given the chance. She look the part. *Like a true lady of the court.*

Blueblood remembered how they had met before outside by the garden. Experimentally, he lingered longer than before among the gathered ponies waiting to ascend the stairs and meet Princess Celestia. The purple pony - Twilight Sparkle - was up there, too, hanging by his aunt's side. Blueblood wondered for moment if she planned to just hang around Celestia all night? She didn't seem like the type who wanted to reinforce her own position by

flaunting her close relationship with the Princess in the snouts of the nobles and lords. What was she up to?

He put that question on the backburner.

Rarity.

Rarity was demurely mingling on her own, but he could see her keeping a discrete eye on him. Not particularly caring just how much his decision would end up bring ruin to the Gala, Blueblood graced her with a small, polished smile. Excusing himself, he headed for the rose bushes. It would just be a few minutes, and then he'd "catch" her coyly sniffing a rose, and use it to introduce himself. Just like before.

If the Gala wanted to screw with him; he could screw with the Gala.

Old habits, it was said, die hard.

He'd intended to enjoy himself. To not care one whit about the end of the Gala.

It had proven harder than he thought. In his heart, he wanted the Gala to be a success. He wanted the power and prestige of being patron to successful cliens. He wanted supplicants to approach him, begging to be given a hoof in the door for next year. He wanted compliments for his contributions to this most high society of all events. He wanted things to go his way. He wanted...

Well, it seemed fate didn't care what he wanted.

At the least, however, he wanted to not have to lament the disaster to come, yet it was always there in the back of his mind. Contrary to what he had expected, being around Rarity didn't make it easier. It made it harder. Despite being his charming self and having quite a little fun at her expense, the mirth of watching her expression fall as he took the rose she had clearly expected him to give her for herself... and then her ruining her dress with that spill... and then making her pay for that carnival food, which he ate just for the fun of following through... on repeat, it was all so stupidly hollow. Two days ago, he had been laughing inside at what he could put her through. Now it was already stale as rotten millet.

The cake hit his face, and Blueblood realized he didn't even care.

At least this time, the walls didn't come crashing down. Not until after the animals attacked and everypony turned to a blind panic. No. Blueblood just watched and counted as twenty-thousand bit tapestries ripped free and fell to the ground, a million-bit Trotsuir sculpture of Luna, inlaid with gold, shattered, and then, finally... single piece marble pillars, each a priceless original from the Old Castle... toppled.

Snorting, a bit of apple cake dribbled down his nose to his upper lip.

Instinctively, his tongue darted out to wipe away the frosting and flakes.

It actually wasn't that bad.

Prince Blueblood, Royal Scion of Equestria, Illustrious Veneur and Marker of Stupid Little Lines on Maps...

Sighed as he drank.

He'd retreated to the Wonderbolt VIP lounge as soon as the Gala started. He didn't even want to see Rarity, or any other familiar faces. Over and over he had been through that mess. He didn't want to know. He didn't want to care. It was all just so... pointless and stupid. Here he was. Again. At the Gala. Again.

"Hey, if it isn't the Prince!"

Blue eyes lifted from staring at his cup, finding bold gold and blue markings on a coat-tight suit. A Wonderbolt suit. It made sense. He was in their VIP lounge, even if it was just to put a wall between him and... everything else in the Gala. He had been standing alone, purposefully so, but leaned back at the two guests. One was an electric blue stallion with a sloppy dark blue mane; the other an attractive gold-coated mare with amber eyes and a shockingly bright orange mane.

He knew these two; he'd paid for much of their paycheck tonight.

More wasted bits, not that it mattered anymore.

"Prince Blueblood," the female half of the duo had the grace to bow, and elbowed her companion to do the same. "What a surprise to see you here."

"I suppose it is," he replied, injecting a bit of his old self into his flagging spirits. One must look good, after all. Even if one felt like barnyard shit.

"I'm Spitfire," the mare kept her amiable tone. "And this is Soarin. Are you..." She looked around, but only half heartedly. "Are you waiting for anyone? If you want, we could get Captain Thunderhead or Raging Storm?"

"That isn't necessary." He wasn't here to see either of the senior Flight Leaders.

"Hey," Soarin spoke up with a familiar grin. "Did ya see the performance? What'd ya think?"

Blueblood shrugged, the drink half finished and half warm in his gut granting him a comfortable indifference. Normally he would have showered the performers with praise, regardless of whether he meant it or not. Courtly life had taught him well to only speak ill of others behind their back.

"It did the job," he replied. "The crowd liked it."

"Well," Spitfire seemed a bit surprised by the answer. She snared a quick look with Soarin before turning her eyes back on the Prince. "Did you like it?"

"I said it did it's job," Blueblood repeated. The Wonderbolts weren't here at the Gala to impress him. They were there to impress the *guests*.

"You still haven't answered the question," Spitfire pressed. Boldly, too, since she was starting to get on his nerves. Wonderbolt or not, that wasn't particularly wise.

"What'cha got there?" Soarin asked, changing the question and gesturing to the drink.

Before Blueblood could answer - he wasn't even sure what he was thinking, but was willing to just make an answer up - he noticed a duo of photographers hovering close by. Literally. They were pegasi. Soarin and

Spitfire noticed it, too, and had the decency to blush a bit at the unwanted attention. There was a line of guests just waiting to have their picture taken with the famous young Wonderbolt duo. Impatient guests.

Yet the photographers were wary of interrupting when the two were in the presence of certain royal company. Even a little drunk, Blueblood put things together. Seeing all three staring at them, one of the photographers got a bit bold, and tried to step in.

"Excuse me," he began. "If we could just..."

"Leave us," Blueblood ordered... suppressing a grin until the two pegasi fled back to find some other Wonderbolts to corral. Spitfire and Soarin gave audible sighs of relief, and smiled at him in thanks. It was ironic. He had hired those photographers, too.

The thought actually dredged a genuine laugh out of the sullen Prince.

"Thanks," Soarin said, scratching the back of his mane. "We haven't had a minute to ourselves all night."

"Hm?" Blueblood asked. "You are quite famous."

"I hate parties like this," Spitfire explained with a grin, suspecting that maybe he did too. And the truth was... now.. he kind of did. Or at least this one, specific Gala. "I mean, yeah, we're famous... but our fans are out there." She pointed to the gardens. "Not in here."

It took Blueblood a second to realize she wasn't pointing at the gardens, she was pointing past them. Out into the streets of Canterlot and beyond.

He turned his head to gaze out there.

Slowly, he returned to Soarin and Spitfire.

"You want to get out of here?" Spitfire asked, and Soarin grinned widely.

"...yes ...why not?"

Wonderbolts or not, he was a proud and noble Prince of Equestria. Such a place was beneath him.

Blueblood took a certain perverse pleasure in going inside anyway. He had heard of such establishments: "dives" and pubs and gathering places for riffraff. It wasn't quite as scandalous as entering a house of "ill repute" but it was far worse than he had ever dared to do before. No doubt the tabloids would be all atwitter with the news. Ha!

As if.

Soarin and Spitfire had shed their Wonderbolt uniforms, and he had thrown his Hoity-exclusive dinner jacket into the bushes outside. No one had dared question any of them. They had just walked out of the party. Just walked out.

Blueblood still couldn't quite believe it.

Leaving the castle grounds had, at first, filled him with a certain trepidation. Canterlot was a clean city, but there were more than a few ways to get truly dirty out here. There also weren't any servants or guards to call on... unless one counted the two Wonderbolts themselves, both of which had at least some military training. It took a little while, but finishing off another drink had calmed his nerves enough to relax more properly.

He had all but reared when Spitfire suddenly jumped up and tousled his mane - his precious mane - to better hide his identity. It was shocking! Scandalous! Improper! His perfect mane was one of his finest features, not that he liked to discriminate. The horn was number one, of course, but all his other features were equally perfect and all tied in second place.

"Now you're ready to hit the town!" the Wonderbolt had declared, elbowing him playfully.

"This is the place!" Soarin had declared as they approached the... business.

They'd delved into the Merchant District. Not the seedy part, mind you - the "new money" rich part of Canterlot. The bar wasn't even particularly low brow. It was just so un-aristocratic! It catered to rich and middle class working ponies. They were a social strata below proper landed nobility.

Getting inside was actually due to the Wonderbolts, who the two security ponies recognized. They did not even recognize their beloved Prince. Blueblood wasn't sure whether he was more shocked or disgusted by this. Or even a little thrilled. Anonymity was so... alien...

They paid just to have a private booth.

After that, he offered to pay for the drinks. He was rich, after all, and it wasn't like it mattered. No one but he would remember the money he threw away tomorrow. They began with a round of the house's most expensive vintage cognac.

Soarin and Spitfire were full of stories of their years flying together. They had attended Young Fliers Camp together, and their parents had put them in the same class in a Gifted Fliers program. Soarin, from a middling family in Cloudsdale, had entered the Territorial Air Guard for a time to get into the Wonderbolts. Spitfire, from a richer family, had learned from a tutor and then become one. They met again in the Wonderbolts 'bootcamp' and become inducted in consecutive years. Now they flew together, living their dream.

After listening to them, Blueblood wished he had a story like that. As much as he wracked his brain, he simply didn't. He had been tutored since he was a foal. He really had neither peers nor friends. The only colleagues he had were the other secretaries and ministers of the Royal Household. He thought instead about telling a raunchy story about Princess Celestia. Auntie was the one with the interesting and eternal life. Either that, or he could make something up... change some names around...

Before he could, however, he noticed the two Wonderbolts glancing back at the door.

A cyan blue pegasus in a Gala dress had somehow managed to talk (or bull) her way inside. She was Spitfire's size and body type, but clearly a few years younger. Her dress - a rainbow colored affair - had gotten dirty from the descent from Castle to Canterlot, the billowy white clouds behind her now streaked with bits of brown and black.

"It's... um...?" Soarin clearly remembered this filly, but not her name.

"Rainbow... Dash, I think?" Spitfire corrected him with practiced ease. "I guess she followed us?" The Wonderbolt turned to Blueblood. "Is it alright if...?"

He shrugged. Two pegasi or three. *It didn't matter.*

Starless Hells, that may as well become his new motto.

Spitfire got up, and hustled over to greet the younger mare. The filly seemed relieved to have not made her little trek in vain, and pointing back at their booth, Spitfire seemed to invite her over. Blueblood couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the look of absolute adulation and fangirl-like pleasure that this new pegasi radiated.

'Another Gala reject,' he couldn't help but think. *'Like all of us here, I suppose.'*

"Kinda cute, isn't she?" Soarin leaned over the booth's table to whisper.

Blueblood could only stare at the Wonderbolt. A grin found his lips. "Spitfire is at that."

Soarin laughed easily. So damn easily. "Not her!"

He leaned back to tuck his legs under him in his seat.

"Rainbow Dash. Gotta remember that," Soarin muttered to himself. "I totally suck with names."

"I don't see how you could forget," he drolly replied. "She's named after her color scheme."

A few seconds later, and this 'Rainbow Dash' was seated opposite, Spitfire having cannily switched seats and sides. She introduced herself, her childlike glee for the Wonderbolts dissipating a bit as she reached out to shake his hand.

"So you're the Prince, huh?" she asked, giving him a hard stare. Like he was an otherworldly space-pony.

"I am the Prince of Equestria, yes," Blueblood replied, glancing at the pegasus's hoof with some disdain. She was hardly the most lady-like of mares, but considering the company, and the circumstances, he shrugged and brusquely shook her hoof in his own.

"Nice to meet ya!" The multi-colored filly shook back, quite firmly. "I'm Rainbow Dash! Future Wonderbolt and one of the Elements of Harmony! But you probably already knew about that part!"

"Ah. Yes. Of course," he lied. *This was one of the Elements of Harmony?*

Of course he knew about the *Elements*. In a general sense.

He hadn't actually been told about the bearers of them, or if he had, he'd promptly forgotten. It didn't seem like it mattered. It had nothing to do with him, or with his tedious work, and the Elements themselves were auntie's pet project. He'd sort of assumed that the six mares they were bonded to had been kept somewhere close by for training or... or something. Deployment. It was strange seeing one as... well, as a mare.

And... if this one was at the Gala, then were the others as well?

Could the Elements also be the answer to his problem?

It was something to consider.

Blueblood's attention wandered for a bit as Dash regaled two of her idols with chatter about Rain Booms and chasing lightning and exotic weather phenomenon. It was typical pegasi chat; kind of annoying, actually, since he doubted any of them would appreciate him gibbering on about unicorn magic. There were some interesting anecdotes behind and between the boasting, and Blueblood just let himself relax. Another round of drinks, and then two more, helped in that respect. They even all had a good laugh when Dash downed about two hundred bits worth of Royal Stables Brandy in a single gulp, leading to much coughing and repeated assurances of 'I can handle it; it's cool!'

It was so... mundane and pedestrian.

But the Prince couldn't help but marvel that there was a certain intoxication, not just to the actual physical intoxication, but to being so carefree. A dozen

paparazzi could burst in, cameras flashing, and he wouldn't bat an eye laughing in their faces. None of it mattered, and he was starting to wonder if that was really such a bad thing.

"Hey, Blueblood!" Soarin pounded his hoof on the table. "Let's hear something from you, man! Story! Story!"

"Yeah!" Dash quickly joined in, also stomping a gold-slippered hoof. "Let's get a story from the Prince!"

Spitfire just smiled at him. "Come on. You know you want to."

"You want a story, is that it?" He didn't really have that many options. He didn't have any tricks to tell of, and he didn't think anypony would be excited to hear bout backroom deals or political scheming or... map making.

"Story!" "Story!" "Story!"

"If you insist. If you insist." He held up a hoof for some silence. His thoughts were already a bit murky; a cheering section just made it worse. He did have one semi-good story to his name. "Do any of you know where the Clopagos are?"

The three pegasi returned questioning stares.

"I suppose not," Blueblood continued with a sigh. "They're islands far to the south. Tropical islands. Equatorial."

He shook his head; tried to focus. "Anyway. Some pegasi wanted permission to go down there to collect wild cloud samples. They came to me for money to fund the trip. You know, since..." He tapped his flank, and the compass rose there. "It was on the no-fly list. I got things together and even went down myself. I thought of it as a vacation; a chance to relax on a beach... far from Canterlot... far from auntie... you know, while the pegasi did all the actual work."

He smirked at that.

"There was one mare, though." He looked longingly at the ceiling. "On the last day down there, she came down to the beach. We talked. Had a few

drinks. Ate exotic fruits. Then we swam in the water and made love like Sea Ponies. That," the Prince of Equestria sighed. "Well... that was a good day. Why couldn't this day... be that day...?"

He stared into his drink, his voice becoming quiet. "Over and over again?"

He paused, noticing the beet red blushing of the mare opposite, hiding her cheeks behind her hooves. Soarin was chuckling to himself, clearly having enjoyed the story. Spitfire leaned over and cleared her throat.

"Well, I think it's romantic," she gave him a teasing look. "In the water, hm?"

"Y-you guys!" Dash objected. "Come on!"

"Mid-air is the way to go," Soarin boasted, holding up his drink. "Nothing like it!"

Blueblood snorted dismissingly. "Pegasi."

"Live for the moment, man!" Soarin finished off his drink and set it down on the table, grinning broadly all the while. "No regrets!"

"Live like there's no tomorrow?" The noblepony asked, staring across the table and then to his side at the three accomplished flyers. He shook his head.

"And what if there literally was no tomorrow?" he asked. "What then?"

"If there's no tomorrow," Rainbow Dash spoke up, despite her embarrassment. She put her hooves on the table, her cheeks still blushing. "Then you can just do whatever you want today!" Her rose colored eyes darted over to Soarin sitting next to her. "Sounds kinda fun, actually."

The Wonderbolt caught the stare and grinned cheekily.

"You know what?" The Prince of Equestria made up his mind. He noticed Spitfire smiling at him. There wouldn't be any objections there, it seemed. "I think... you're right."

*"You'll be seeing Rain Booms!
Ooo-ooo-oooh!
Equestrian Girls, we're kinda magical!
Boots on hooves, bikinis on top!"*

A white hoof hovered, gently turning off the radio.

A second later, and a bed-headed Blueblood sat straight up. A quick glance to his side didn't reveal any company. Everything was the same. Not even a hangover.

Everything was the same!

Running his hooves through his hair, Blueblood laughed. And laughed.

And laughed.

"Yes! Goo-ood morning Canterlot!" Hopping out of bed with a spring in his step, he pulled open the curtains to take a good look at the morning. And what a beautiful, carefree morning it was! Today was the day! A fresh new day of infinite possibilities and no consequences!

Ringling the bell for his chamber maids, he waited for them with an almost giddy smile.

"Light Touch." He pointed to the blue coated mare. "Right? Just a quick brush over. Just get out the knots. I'm going natural today."

"But... but sir..." Light Touch very nearly protested. "We were told to..."

"Ehhhh. It doesn't matter!" He said that with almost Dash-like glee. He really had to thank that little filly sometime. "Just a quick bushing."

"If you insist, sir," Light Touch relented.

And, if Blueblood wasn't mistaken, he actually caught Sandy smiling a bit, too.

Perhaps his mood was infectious?

"Hello, Auntie! Hello Auntie!" He greeted the Princesses and the dour Household ponies around the table. He singled out one Princess in particular. "Quite the morning today! I don't think I've seen the sun this radiant in years!"

"Oh, why thank you, Blueblood," Celestia took the compliment with due decorum while still seeming visibly pleased.

Taking his seat, he noticed Proper Place staring at him. The old unicorn looked lost for words.

"Before you ask," Blueblood gleefully held up a hoof to cut the old advisor off. "I am looking forward to the Gala tonight, yes I did hire the Canterlot Chamber Orchestra to play for us, and I've heard their rendition of Entry of the Princess in Sun's Light is a wonder to behold."

Knowing the servant was within speaking distance even before she got there, he continued:

"Tea, with milk and ginger. Nothing else. I'm going out this morning."

"You are?" This time, to his surprise, the question came from Luna.

It was also spoken more than a little loudly.

"I mean," she repeated, more quietly. "You are?" The dark alicorn gave him a curious look. "You never did so before."

"That's quite true," Celestia agreed.

"Things change," Blueblood assured them, laughing softly at his own private joke. "Things change."

The song and dance before the gates of Canterlot was half finished when a carriage rolled up. This was no ordinary means of conveyance, however. Studded with jewels in glittering, swirling, interlaced rivers and streams, and imported from halfway across the country, it was long enough to carry a dozen ponies or more with room to spare. A collective gasp sucked the air from the varied revelers about to enter the castle grounds, and every head and every pair of eyes turned to stare.

Royal Guards, dressed in expensive tuxedos, hurried to flank the doors of the stretch carriage.

A cream colored leg emerged first, teasingly, tantalizingly, sporting a sparkling slipper that probably cost more than most ponies made in a year. It was followed soon after by the Pony of Pop herself, Sapphire Shores. No mere dress would do for The Sensation, and instead she appeared in an intricate French Maid outfit, as saucy as it was ridiculously overpriced. Tiny diamonds caught the light along the lace filigree as the pony superstar emerged, lighting her up the center of the universe.

A step behind her, Blueblood reveled in the scene he was making. Gone was the proper dinner suit. Instead, his flanks scintillated with rhinestones, the silver spurs on his cowboy boots jingling. He'd expressly purchased the most gaudy, tacky, inappropriate and expensive ensemble within a thousand miles. A blue silk scarf and cowboy hat completed the utterly atrocious look.

Sapphire Shores loved it.

Further proof in Blueblood's mind that he had done well in picking something truly terrible.

The effect could not be argued with. A hundred ponies stood, stunned, staring at the pair. The spotlight hadn't just been stolen. It had been put in a safe, locked with a key, the key had been buried, and a house had been built over it. But nothing - nothing at all - compared to the look of shock on auntie Celestia's face when she saw the duo walk through the gate. Priceless. Beyond priceless!

Blueblood choose that moment to propose to the Pony of Pop.

Let her be the Princess of Pop!

Sapphire was the perfect partner in crime. She didn't even mind when, accepting, they began to make out right in the center of the Royal Oratory.

Blueblood began the day with a banquet.

No: not just a banquet. A feast.

He began the day with a *feast*. When asked what he wanted for breakfast, after giving it a moment's thought, the Esteemed Prince had answered:

"I don't know. One of everything you can make, I suppose."

The table had been momentarily stunned silent, broken only by wary, uncomfortable laughter.

"No, really," Blueblood had repeated. "One of everything."

One or two stuttering protests aside - together with a 'Yes, of course I'll pay for it, no auntie, it won't ALL go to waste' - the table was soon laden with every treat imaginable. Those that were not freshly produced by the castle staff were brought from pastry shops and high class establishments in the city proper. Blueblood didn't mind waiting. It wasn't about the food. It was the *spectacle*.

No doubt suspecting that her nephew was intending to indulge in the family tradition of epic trolling, Celestia had stuck around just long enough to grasp the extent of his madness. She had even partaken in a few of the freshly arriving treats, seeing it as something of a challenge to keep up with him. For an hour or more, the two Royals played a deadly game of caloric chicken, their waist lines and cholesterol levels (and pride) on the line.

Blueblood considered it a point of disgusting, gluttonous pride to outlast Equestria's immortal Princess of the Sun.

Eventually, minus the servants, only one pony remained at the table.

Auntie Luna had remained silent the entire time, watching as her sister and nephew gorge themselves like the ancient hedonists of old. Despite normally turning in to rest after a long night guiding the moon, Luna remained even after Celestia left. Blueblood began to wonder if she was simply fascinated by seeing one pony stuff himself on such a vast array of sweets. He hadn't seen her eat any herself.

"Rather disgusting, isn't it?"

Finally, the Princess of the moon speaks.

"Allow me to disagree," he replied, raising his voice to ensure she could hear him. He held up a frosting crowned confection. "These... cupcakes... as they're called, are quite delicious!"

"We were referring to your behavior," Luna's voice projected easily across the table. He knew that spell. "It is rather atrocious."

"All in the eye of the beholder," he countered, using the same spell to project his voice.

To drive the point home, he scooped up a dollop of cream with a fresh strawberry, placing it on his tongue with an indulgent grin. Luna's face scrunched up in distaste. Though, a second later, she did tentatively levitate over a small round breakfast treat. A 'donut' they were called. Blueblood had never condescended to try one before.

That one... had *sprinkles*.

"Gluttony is a vice we have seen consume more than a few ponies," Luna told him, dibbling at the donut experimentally. As always, she was prim and proper; the perfect Princess. Albeit loud. She was old fashioned, like he w-like he *had been*.

"I'm not worried about that," he assured her, floating over a donut of his own and eating it in one bite.

"We find that hard to believe. In our experience, you appear to care a great deal what others think of you." Luna took a small bite of her pastry, smiling as she found it to her liking. "Our sister in particular."

Blueblood frowned at the observation.

"Yes, well." He glanced away, to try and find something new to try. "Not anymore."

Luna was silent for a time, as she finished her donut.

"So you say," she replied, standing up to leave. Her guards quickly moved to flank her as she left. "Yet," she added over her shoulder. "We can't help but find your desire for attention rather pathetic. We will leave you to your repast."

Blueblood followed the alicorn with his eyes before staring at a plate of sweet cakes, layered in a rainbow of colors in jam. He willed a fork to take a bite, but found his appetite - with his audience - gone. Raising a napkin to the corner of his mouth, he wiped away a smudge of jelly.

What did that old bat know anyway?

"Prince Blueblood."

"Proper Place. You look well."

"Yes, thank you. I trust you are looking forward to this Evening's Gala? I have heard you hired from the Canterlot Chamber Orchestra company? I look forward to their rendition of Entry of the Princess in Sun's Light."

"As... do I, Chamberlain. As do I."

Blueblood tried to eat his usual.

Tea, with milk and ginger. It always helped to wake him up. As for the rest: he still had little appetite for much of anything. Not that he wasn't hungry. It was the same as every morning. He just.. couldn't quite look at the plates of food the same way. Out of curiosity, he beckoned over a servant and requested an identical serving to what Celestia had: the oats and apples he had always derided. It wasn't like it hurt to try.

As things wound down, proceeding as they always did, the Prince couldn't help but glance in the direction of his other Aunt. The one he had never known. The one who had only entered the life of the Court over the last year. Who had done less than that, as few saw her outside of her nightly duty raising and lowering the moon.

"Auntie," Blueblood spoke up, sensing he was almost out of time.

Celestia immediately set her eyes on him, but it wasn't her he meant to address-

"Auntie Luna," he said again, and the dark Princess gave him a nonplused look, unused to being addressed when her sister was present. "What is it like...? To be immortal?"

Next to her, Celestia raised an eyebrow at the strange question.

Luna set her hooves against her chest and lowered her eyes. "Why... are you asking us that?"

"I guess, the bigger question is," Blueblood continued, raising his chin. "When you're destined to live forever, what do you do with your life? I mean. Besides what you have to? How do you live with it?"

Like before, it took a second or two for Luna to really determine how to respond.

"One simply does," she answered, standing up to leave.

He watched her go, and sighed.

That... really wasn't the response he had hoped for.

Chapter 2

*"You'll be seeing Rain Booms!
Ooo-ooo-oooh!
Equestrian Girls, we're kinda magical!
Boots on hooves, bikinis on top!"*

Blueblood let the radio play.

He didn't bother with breakfast, either.

Ponyville.

"What do you mean, you don't have the Elements of Harmony?"

The Mayor was probably regretting submitting to his requests.

She cringed away as Blueblood thundered, stamping a hoof against the edge of his chariot hard enough to crack a wheel. It didn't help that the noblepony's ire was solely directed at the six mares in front of him, and not the crowd of gawking - and growing - onlookers. Even that cross-eyes pegasus was staring.

"You six **ARE** the gods damned Elements of Harmony!" he yelled, "What? Did you lose *yourselves*?" He stomped again, utterly enraged. "Sell your souls maybe?"

It hadn't taken much to determine the locations and identities of the six mares. Of course, that unicorn had been one of them. Of-freaking-course. Still, it shouldn't have mattered. A quick ride down to Ponyville, a communiqué to the guards about royal decrees, and he had assembled the six fillies in the town square. He couldn't care less what else the ponies of this Podunk village saw or thought. It was time to get this over with.

It was time for these six mares to do their blasted job and FIX things!

"Prince Blueblood," Twilight - the egghead of the bunch - was the first to recover her voice. She stood next to a cowering golden pegasus who looked ready to bolt in fright. "Princess Celestia has the Elements now. We can't use them without her giving them to us."

"No. No. No. No! NO!" He corrected her, pointing accusingly with a shaking hoof. "Do not tell me that. Do not tell me you don't have the bloody Elements. I need YOU-" He pointed at each of them in turn. "To. BLAST. ME!"

The six mares all exchanged looks of worry.

"Hit me with a rainbow! Bombard me with sparkles!" He all but pounded his hoof into his chest. "Drown me in light! Use the magic of Friendship! Do **something!**"

The pink one wound her hoof around and crossed her eyes comically. "And ponies call ME crazy!"

Blueblood screamed.

"Auntie. Out of curiosity, do you have the Elements of Harmony?"

"Auntie. I've heard from your student, Twilight Sparkle, that you've sequestered the Elements of Harmony somewhere safe? I don't suppose you could-"

"It has come to my attention recently that-"

"Auntie, if I could just-"

"Princess Celestia, Auntie, please-!"

"At the gala. At the gala."

"At the gala, in the garden. I'm going to see them all. All the creatures. I'll befriend them at the gala."

"At the gala. All the birdies and the critters. They will love me, big and small. We'll become good friends forever. Right here at the Gala."

"All our dreams will come true. Right here at the Gala. At the Gala."

"At the gala. It's amazing. I will sell them. That you heard of. All my appletastic treats. Yummy, yummy. Hungry ponies. Give us samples. They will buy them. We will buy them. Caramel apples, apple sweets. Gimme some."

Blueblood mouthed the lyrics to the absurd musical number. He knew it by heart at this point.

He didn't even bother with the Gala itself anymore. Sometimes he stayed and watched as one or two or any number of things went wrong. It never changed. Nothing ever changed. It was boring at best, torture at worst. So more often than not, he left.

Sometimes he wandered.

Sometimes he studied and experimented on himself.

Sometimes he got lost.

Sometimes he just drank himself into a stupor.

"Into the Gala, meet new friends. Into the Gala, sell some apples. Into the Gala, find my prince. Prove I'm as great as a Wonderbolt. To meet. To sell. To find. To prove. To woo. To talk."

Doomed.

They were all doomed. Even if one of them got what they wanted, the others wouldn't.

"Into the Gala. Into the Gala. And we'll have the best night ever." He repeated, even though he could barely hear the words of the ponies below. "At the Gala."

Prince Blueblood took a deep breath, exhaled, and tossed himself off the highest tower in Canterlot.

*"You'll be seeing Rain Booms!
Ooo-ooo-oooh!
Equestrian Girls, we're kinda magical!
Boots on hooves, bikinis on top!"*

The radio died as Blueblood swatted it off his dresser, tearing out the power cord.

*"You'll be seeing Rain Booms!
Ooo-ooo-oooh!
Equestrian Girls, we're kinda-"*

A heavy hoof descended, smashing the accursed contraption with a squeal.

*"You'll be seeing Rain Booms!
Ooo-ooo-oooh!"*

"RAAAGH!"

A magical glow wrapped around the radio, crushing it into a ball of crumpled metal and splintering wood.

"Blueblood!" Celestia roared, absolutely livid. "What do you think you're doing? What have you done?"

It all felt so surreal.

Canterlot Palace was burning.

It didn't matter how angry auntie was. It was amazing, really. The looks on everypony's faces.

The Royal Guards were staring, slack jawed and dumbstruck, at the evil purple and green fire as it merrily danced from tower to tower, spire to spire, consuming everything. Pegasi were in the air, circling like frantic buzzards - no, more like buzzing flies - trying feverishly to use clouds and rain to put out the blaze. As if he hadn't planned for that. As if he didn't know the flight patterns of every one, like he knew the patrol routes of the guards, like he knew the weak spots of the castle.

Canterlot was burning, and no pony could save it.

A thousand years and more. Ash. All to Ash.

Blueblood laughed, standing amid the flames. A circle of magic kept him safe, for a time. It didn't matter. Just long enough for him to be sure. He had to be sure. Absolutely sure. He needed to see the Gala end with his own eyes.

"No more Galas!" He roared over the magical dragon flames and enchanted fire. "This was the only way to be sure! No more! Never again!"

"Gods and stars, Nephew!" Celestia took to the air, tried to reach for him with her magic -

Blueblood already felt the green fire, dancing up his legs - so warm!

She was too late.

The foolish guests who had arrived early could only watch, stunned, dumbstruck as the Light that was Canterlot became a demonic bonfire. The incantations and forbidden scrolls spoke of a fire that would burn for eleven days and eleven nights; that could be extinguished by neither water nor wind nor mortal magic. All it required as a reagent was the body and soul of a single pony.

It was the Gala. It had to be the Gala.

No. More.

No. More. Galas.

*"You'll be seeing Rain Booms!
Ooo-ooo-oooh!
Equestrian Girls, we're kinda magical!
Boots on hooves, bikinis on top!"*

Alive.

Still alive.

Always alive.

*"You'll be seeing Rain Booms!
Ooo-ooo-oooh!
Equestrian Girls, we're kinda magical!
Boots on hooves, bikinis on top!"*

Prince Blueblood, Prince of the Realm, Grand Veneur, etc etc...

Blueblood sat, stuff and silent, as Light Touch and Sandy got him ready for breakfast. He thought briefly about asking one of them to draw the water for the tub again. It was one of the quicker ways to end his day. There was an expensive hair dryer at hoof that did the job very well. Of course, all it would have done would be to send him back to where he was a few minutes ago.

It wasn't a permanent solution.

As if sensing his strange mood, Light Touch peeked from behind the mirror she held up for him. "Prince Blueblood?"

"Yes. Yes," he slowly snapped out of the stupor. Sometimes it was easier just to wait out that day, to jump through the hoops, rather than restart from the beginning. *Again.* "This is fine. Thank you, Light Touch."

"Um. Thank you, sir." The chamber maid bowed, surprised as always to be complimented on her work. Or even addressed.

"There isn't anything I could ever say just to put you at ease, is there?" he asked, knowing the answer already.

"I am at ease, my Lord," Light Touch lied, and bowed more deeply. Sandy, as always, did the same. "We both are."

Blueblood nodded. There was nothing more to say.

Today was another damned day.

...

Arriving at the table, Blueblood saw the same scene as always. Celestia was calmly eating her oats and apples - a dish he had genuinely tried, and decided he didn't care for - while Luna was finishing her dinner and sipping from her wine glass. Proper Place was occupying a place of honor next to the empty chair where Blueblood traditionally sat. As ordained, he took his place, a ticking gear in a broken clock.

Tea, milk, ginger.

He finished and left early.

Luna walked the same route as always, back to her private chamber.

The night had went well, which was to say, it had come and gone without complaint. She followed the schedule she had posted in advance so no pony was surprised by either the state of the moon or the brightness or darkness of the night sky. Everything went well, following the greater scheme. The old routine also began to bring back her powers, nullified as they had briefly been by the Elements of Harmony. Her stature had improved, and her hair was beginning to return to it's ethereal state.

There was neither anything to bemoan nor anything to be excited about. It was a nice medium; a pleasant middle ground. It worked. She could live with it. She wasn't unhappy, and she had her sister again. It was... nice.

Her guards stiffened at her sides, pausing.

Luna looked up to see what the matter was. The answer was curious: it was Blueblood. Was he lost? He was standing in the middle of the hall, blocking the way. She'd noticed a marked change in his bearing this morning. Normally he was almost insufferably haughty and aloof, even for her tastes. He would have fit in well with the nobles a thousand years ago. Now, he looked... weary.

"Auntie Luna," he said, using the improper affection Celestia had no doubt taught him.

"What... What is it like?" he asked, looking at her with desperate eyes. "To be immortal?"

Luna blinked, finding the question both odd and unexpected.

"Why are you asking us that?"

"I guess, the bigger question is," Blueblood continued. "When you're destined to live forever, what do you do with your life? Besides what you have to? How do you live with it?"

Luna considered the question, and how to reply. She opened her mouth-

"One simply does," he guessed. "That's what you were about to say, isn't it?"

The Princess of the Moon raised a hoof to her chin.

"It... was, yes," she answered, and explained a bit more, feeling the impulse to at least provide some new insight, however enigmatic.

"Immortality is something you endure. It is a blessing in some ways, but a curse in others."

What Blueblood said next, Luna did not expect to ever hear.

"I think I'm immortal," he stated it with a measure of despair. "Not like you or auntie Celestia," he quickly elaborated. "A different immortal. Every day... every day is the same for me. I can't die. I can't stop it. Isn't that's what it means to be immortal? Is this what it's like?"

Luna's expression darkened; expecting a joke of some kind. A poor one.

One of her guards was less reserved. He snorted dismissingly at the statement, nostrils flaring.

"You think it's funny, don't you?" Blueblood asked, not with malice. He simply sounded detached, despite the insult. "I guess it is kind of funny. Who would believe a crazy story like that?"

The Prince sighed and shook his head.

"Not like believing you saw a hippocamp when you were a six, and refusing to go into the water or even take a bath for the next ten years."

The guard stiffened, and very quietly laughed. "I don't know what your talking about, Lord Prince. Sea Ponies..." He couldn't repress a traumatic, visceral shudder. "They're not real. Just... old mare's tales. They're not real."

"Wrath, I'm guessing you didn't hear that one about your partner?" Blueblood asked the other guard, tilting his head to the side in faux curiosity. "Well, you've only been teamed up for a month and five days, and you didn't even talk to one another until two days after that. Not to mention that you didn't get along very well with your last partner in the Royal Guard. The one who didn't want to work with you because he found out you liked colts as well as mares?"

The guard to Luna's left actually trotted back a step in shock.

"What?" he growled. "H-how do you...? How could you...?"

"You don't need to worry," the Prince assured him with a hollow, emotionless grin. "Despite his phobia of aquatic ponies, Fury here's already heard the rumors and decided they don't matter."

Blueblood then added, for good measure: "Isn't that nice? Goodwill among Auntie Luna's bodyguards. Oh, and a pair of strong wings to pull that bat-themed chariot the Princess is trying to build in secret. The one she has in her cave beneath Canterlot? Isn't that a bit tacky, auntie?"

Luna was gaping now, but quickly comported herself.

"How... do you know about that?" she asked, not letting her regal veil slip, despite the near gaffe. "Even Celestia doesn't know... so... how?"

"I've had time to learn a lot of things," the Prince replied. "Boredom will do that to a pony. Once he gets tired of thinking up new ways to kill himself."

"Or perhaps," Luna reasoned. "You're using some sort of spell to read minds?"

"On those two?" he pointed at the pair of guards. "Maybe. On you, auntie? Do you really think I could?" He tapped the front edge of his hoof on the floor, the equivalent of a finger-snap. "Oh, but I forgot. You don't like being called 'auntie.' You could just have said so, you know. I'd have stopped."

Silence reigned after that, as Luna tried to rationalize her great-great-great nephew, who she had hardly spoken to in months, whose family she hardly knew, knowing a private pet peeve she hadn't shared with anyone. Even Celestia didn't know. At her sides, the two Royal Guards looked to each other, and then to her, for orders. Or at least an explanation.

"I could go on, if you need more convincing," Blueblood promised. "I know almost everyone in the palace by this point."

"How much," Luna finally said. "How much do you know about *us*?"

Meaning the 'royal us.'

Blueblood dipped his head in respect.

"Not that much," he readily admitted. "You don't like to talk about your past. The easiest way to get information out of you is to rile you up and make you angry. Or indignant."

"Then why?" the Princess inquired. "Why approach us now with this? Why not Celestia?"

"What makes you think I haven't tried?" he answered her question with one of his own. "Besides, I've seen how my auntie deals with her immortal life. I don't think I can live like that. I don't... I don't even want to be like this. I think you're the only one who can keep me from going completely insane. Please."

"Please," he asked again, and lowered onto his hooves, his head and horn brushing the floor. "Please believe me."

He remained there, bowing more deeply than Luna remembered seeing a pony bow. Not since a thousand years ago.

"Guards," she said, and then raised her voice, more authoritatively. "Leave us. We would have words with our... nephew." Seeing the pair tense, she added the caveat, "And tell none of what you have heard here. Understood?"

"Yes, Princess!" her two guards replied in stereo.

They hastened to leave, and only the pair of Royals remained.

"We..." Luna corrected herself. "I... am listening."

They ended up at the Royal Observatory.

This, it turned out, was where Luna spent every Gala night. Blueblood hadn't even been to this part of the palace in years. The once bare walls were covered in diagrams of the various malleable stellar phenomenon, most prominently a nebula that Luna was planning to move over the next few months to free up some bright but normally obscured stars. There were paintings of the moon next to hoof-sketched layouts of the moon, made by Luna herself. With her 'face' gone from the night sky, the full moon was too bare for her liking. She intended to phase in new 'mares' or dark seas as a replacement over the next ten years.

Blueblood recognized the passion and artistic obsession in the many layouts and prints, many marked with tiny, fine notes on the margins and lines and arrows and corrections and redactions and re-corrections. His dark aunt was like an artist with an ever changing palette, and she had repurposed the old Observatory as her atelier.

He even suggested using the term, an idea that drew polite chuckles.

"Atelier?" she asked. "Is that not a bit pretentious?"

"Normally it would be," he agreed. "But in this case, I think it fits."

Outside, fireworks exploded as the Gala roared into full swing. That musical number from every Gala opening could be just barely heard through the intervening distance and open windows. It had driven Blueblood nearly to madness before, but for the first time in a long time, he felt almost at ease. He smirked as his dart landed soundly in the center of the crudely drawn target circle.

"How *doest* thou manage that?" Luna grumbled, her old Equinese slipping in as she grew frustrated.

Her royal highness glared balefully at the feathered dart resting in the cup of her bare hoof. Green eyes fixated on the concentric circles, and foregoing magic - that would be cheating! - Luna huffed as she threw. The dart overshot, hitting the outermost edge of the cardboard bullseye.

"Blast!"

"Now, now, you aren't throwing a rock," he reminded the Princess of the Night. "Visualize it and make an easy, flowing movement."

Blueblood picked up another blue feathered dart, and flicked it. Not even very quickly, it seemed to leisurely drift through the air to land on target, right next to one of its fellows, smack dap in the center. Luna glowered playfully, and tried again, with much less force.

It took a little while, but finally she got one near-center.

"Huzzah!" She threw up her hooves in triumph. "Tis not so difficult!"

Blueblood just sat on his haunches and laughed with her. "You'll get the hang of it, eventually."

"This is a... pegasi, game, is it?" Luna asked, sticking out her tongue as she concentrated on repeating her feat.

"It's a common game among the low classes. I just learned it from two pegasi."

"That would be the two Wonderbolts?"

"Soarin and Spitfire," he confirmed, providing the names. "Sometimes I sneak them out of the Gala to have fun in town. It took a lot of practice before I got as good at it as they are." His shoulders trembled as he chuckled. "I also learned how to mix my own drinks. Let me tell you, that one skill has come in handy."

"The proud Prince of Equestria, mixing drinks and slumming with commoners," Luna remarked, amused by the image.

Her next throw was close, but a little off target.

"...But we are curious," despite relaxing a great deal, she continued to use the imperial plural. "Do you ever tell them who you are?"

"Are you suggesting our subjects would not recognize us?" Blueblood declared in a grandiose voice, hoof to his chest.

Luna rolled her eyes in exasperation. "We are suggesting you could hardly stand to not have them recognize you."

"Is that so?" he inquired, chest still puffed out in regal indignation.

"You possess an ego the size of Everfree itself, and you know it."

"Well, since I *am* the pony who decides the borders of Everfree, there is some truth to that." Blueblood joked, but answered his Aunt's question, "When I go out with Spitfire and Soarin, I usually try not to draw attention to myself. But... sometimes... it is cathartic to make a scene."

"Is it...?" Luna hesitated to ask, momentarily glancing towards one of the windows and the Gala beyond. "Is it amusing to be among the common folk? So very much has changed in a thousand years... the classes commingle more than I ever believed possible."

"Before today," she said with some embarrassment. "I never would have imagined you, of all ponies, to partake of such activities."

"I never would have, before," Blueblood admitted, picking up another dart and examining the needle-tip. "Not only didn't I have any interest in such things... it would have been improper to do so. I have spent my entire life cultivating my image. As Blueblood."

He touched the sharpened tip to his other hoof, just enough to pinch the skin a little, but not draw blood.

"Equestria's most handsome stallion. Canterlot's most eligible bachelor. Most untouchable and unassailable noblepony."

He threw the dart with long practiced ease, wedging it between three others of the same color.

"I never really thought I'd accomplish anything, and I never felt like trying. Looking good was enough. When the time came to retire, I'd arrange a marriage with some attractive younger mare and just fade away. Like every Blueblood does. I'm just number fifty-two... unless the royal genealogists somehow slipped up somewhere. Not even a memorable number, like fifty, or sixty. Fifty-two."

"But now, none of that really matters," he said it with a wan, weak smile. "Tomorrow, you'll forget we talked until you fell asleep, and played darts at night after you woke up. You'll look at me over the breakfast table, and wonder quietly how you could be even remotely related to me."

"Nephew..." she began to protest, placing a hoof on his front leg.

"It's alright," he assured her. "That's just how things are. I said earlier that maybe I was immortal, but maybe the truth is that I'm not even here? When you can't live and you can't die, and nothing you do changes anything around you, can you really say that you exist? I used to laugh at funny questions like that when I was a foal."

Blueblood tossed the next dart. Bullseye. "I don't know anymore."

He had just finished when, taken aback, he felt her pull him into a familial hug. Luna was not Celestia's size, not yet anyway, and he was large even for a stallion so they generally stood shoulder to shoulder. It had been a long time since Celestia or his mother had held him, and he reflexively tensed at the front legs around him. Luna herself didn't seem entirely comfortable with familiar contact, and soon let him go, looking away in growing abashment.

She still had some issues of her own regarding 'family.' He could sympathize.

"We don't know..." she began, haltingly. "Maybe our advice isn't the best. This was why we didn't want to give it before."

She smoothed back some of her mane and nodded to herself.

"But," she continued anyway. "You should endure." She looked up at him. "And adapt. And grow. You do exist, nephew. My own immortality has cost me everything but what I have with me now." She gestured to herself. "And my dear sister, too, thank the heavens. The only thing we can do, as ponies, is more forward."

"Move forward?" he asked, snorting in dismissal. "How? How can you?"

"Even if it doesn't seem like it," she told him, bracing her hooves on his shoulders. "Every day is an opportunity. No matter how bleak it looks at first."

Blueblood nodded. "If you say so, Princess."

"You can call us Luna, you know." She sighed, softly. "We would like it if more ponies just called us Luna."

The Gala was a disaster. Again.

Neither the Princess of the Moon nor her estranged nephew cared. They stayed up playing inane games and pointedly not discussing the subject of immortality. The moon was full and high, and after a time Blueblood escaped the tower to track down some coffee to stay awake. Luna had suggested just getting a servant to do it, but he also took it as an excuse to stretch his legs. He returned with a steaming pot from the pantry. Luna found the taste rather foul, and said as much, but Blueblood downed as much as he could. Next time, he told her, he would bring milk and crème.

They talked about stars and moons and maps and cutie marks.

And then it was over.

*"You'll be seeing Rain Booms!
Ooo-ooo-oooh!
Equestrian Girls, we're kinda magical!
Boots on hooves, bikinis on top!"*

Luna was gone. The Observatory was gone.

Blueblood was back in bed. His eyes opened and he lingered a few seconds longer than usual before kicking off his covers and rolling off and onto the floor. It was a new day.

A new day.

...

"Excuse me, but I'm a bit hard'a hearin' ... ya want to do what now?"

"I would like to know about the Royal Gardens," Blueblood explained, for the second time. He leaned closer to the old goat of a gardener. "If you would, please."

His saddlebags were stocked with books from the library: a select cross-section of topics relating to the history, design and influences of the Great Gardens of Canterlot. Despite having some personal history with the Laurel Maze and being an active falconer, he had never cared much for or bothered with the actual gritty details of the lands surrounding the castle. It was time to find some opportunities. It was time to *make* some.

"I'm not sure how much I can tell ya that those books there won't," the groundskeeper replied, tipping his hat respectfully. It was a scruffy looking specimen himself, with a well worn, almost invisible brown cutie-mark. As far back as Blueblood could recall, the old mule had tended to the gardens and the greater twenty for decades.

The Prince levitated out a guide, filled with bookmarks, and opened it to one of the pages.

"You could start by identifying which animals in this book are the most commonly seen close to the Palace. I'm also curious what would happen if some of the Gala guests tonight tried to chase or catch the animals?"

"Ooh?" The groundskeeper scratched his mane as he thought about that. "Well, that probably wouldn't be too good. So, um... I guess ya want to start with the birds?"

"That would be a good place to start," Blueblood agreed. "Let's start with the birds."

...

Blueblood set down his cup (tea - milk and ginger) and glanced across the table.

"Auntie," he spoke up, his tone amiable. "I was wondering how your student in Ponyville has been doing. Twilight Sparkle, if I recall. She's still sending you reports on the magic of friendship, isn't she?"

In a rare display of bewilderment, Celestia stared at her nephew.

"Yes, she is," the immortal Princess replied. "May I ask why the sudden interest?"

He offered a genuine smile. "She's obviously someone very important to you, Auntie. And, to hear you speak of her, she must be quite the filly. It's only natural I'm a bit curious. Besides," he added. "I'll probably meet her at the Gala tonight."

"You actually met her before, once," Celestia changed the topic briefly while she thought up how to really respond. "But you were both too young to remember."

"No time like the present, then."

"I suppose you're right," the Princess decided. "Very well."

...

The Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences was the premier institution of higher learning in all of Equestria. Located in Canterlot, adjacent to (and affiliated with) the Royal Conservatory and Museum, it exclusively invited only the most promising unicorns, pegasi and earth ponies to attend. In theory. In practice... family connections and deep rooted alumni

organizations and fraternities ensured that quite a few less than superbly gifted ponies entered the prestigious academy. These same high society sons and daughters of nobility and industry captains conveniently graduated with a solid "B."

Prince Blueblood was one of these "solid B" graduates.

Except for the occasional charity or fundraiser, he doubted any of the learned minds at the RAAS expected to see him drop by for a visit. Certainly, none of them would have expected him to start pulling strings and cashing in favors. There weren't many universal constants in science or magic, but fortunately, one of them was bits. Funding was always in short supply somewhere. Always.

"Teleportation," the wrinkled old pony grumbled, shaking his head. "You?"

"Come now, I didn't do *that* badly in class," Blueblood objected.

"You blinked two hoof-lengths and threw up all over yourself!"

Professor Whitemane had a pretty sharp memory for such a crazy geezer. The wrinkled old codger had to be pushing a century or more. Somehow. Yet he was as sharp and spry as a stallion half his age. Magic could do that for a pony. Of course, rumor was that Old Whitemane dabbled in alchemy, and forbidden 'mercury flavored' cupcakes. His name had lately become quite ironic: the Professor was bald, save for the short white beard on his chin.

"You have no talent for blinking, much less long range teleportation," Whitemane continued, snorting rudely and dismissively. "That great big horn on your head may as well be a tumor for all the good it does you."

"Be that as it may," Blueblood chafed at the old goat's typical insults. Whitemane was notoriously abrasive towards all his students. He treated his apprentices even worse, or so the college rumor mill claimed.

Time to find out.

"I have been studying the subject and..."

"You? Studying?" Whitemane cut him off, and spat. Actually spat.

"Yes. Me. Studying." The Prince of Equestria grimaced at the spittle that had very nearly nicked his left hoof. "Now, I happen to be making a rather substantial grant to the Academy, but I require a learned mind to assist me..."

"In learning to teleport without soiling yourself?"

"In... that. Yes."

"What a waste of time," the aged unicorn grumbled, but rolled his eyes, at least willing to give it a try. "Very well, show me what you've *supposedly* learned, and I'll take a few minutes to point out how poor you are at it."

...

The Canterlot Chamber Orchestra company was really quite good.

It seemed like forever since he had actually heard them play a proper score. Never once had they managed to endure the Gala long enough to play the signature score that represented Celestia's Royal Entrance and Exit. Blueblood listened to them now while he studied, one of only three ponies in the audience. One day... one day... he would hear Entry of the Princess play in the Ménagerie Ursae.

But not yet.

He jotted down some notes for the future.

Their new cellist was rather pretty as well.

...

"Out of breath already? You know your father, bless his soul, managed twice that distance with half the effort. To think the royal bloodline has become so weak, I weep for Equestria. Not that we need a royal bloodline with not just one but two immortal Princesses on the throne."

Blueblood coughed hard, trying to recover from the short blink across the lecture stage.

"I can't imagine why you're wasting your time with this," Whitemane lectured, heedless of the Princes' state, pacing now and stroking his beard. "Your magical tunneling projection is the most pathetic I've seen in years. My great grandson just got his cutie mark a month ago, and he could do better. You need to tighten up your Star Field. And, for Celestia's sake, stop inhaling when you teleport. Only teleport on an exhale! Were you born this incompetent or do you work at it?"

...

He sucked in the fresh, morning air.

It was so different, outside, now that he knew what those smells were. It all just seemed like a mix of fragrant flowers in one patch, dirt and leaves in another. But on closer inspection, the Gardens were so much more complex than he had ever imagined. He had always known that they were the work of a mad genius - the maddeningly complex hedge labyrinth was proof of that, firsthoof - but even the seemingly simple geometric layout disguised hidden secrets, not for the in-initiated.

The entire garden, radiating outward from the three wings of the Ménagerie, was a diamond within a star within a diamond. It literally morphed in shape and color as the seasons changed: the evergreen outlines and contours becoming more distinct as deciduous trees and bushes shed their leaves. It was a living mural the likes of which dwarfed any of the grand tapestries, vestments or statues on display inside.

Intricate.

Marvelous.

Laudable.

A fitting monument.

Blueblood hardly minded the looks of surprise on passing faces as he worked, cutting away bits of shrubbery, manipulating three different sizes of shears in midair. For some odd reason, a tune he couldn't quite remember the words for hovered in the back of his mind, compelling him to hum to himself as he worked. Ah, or maybe it was just an addictive tune he had picked up from Green Thumb?

"Green Thumb!" He spied the groundskeeper happily sweeping away a few leaves. He loudly hummed the tune. "Do you know a song with that cadence?"

"Yeah, yeah, Ah think ah know that one." The old coot was always quick to fall back on casual talk, day after day, a trait the Prince found himself growing appreciative of. He leaned heavily on his rake. "Art of the... Art of the something."

"I find it annoyingly catchy."

"Yep."

...

The Royal Librarian sat up straight in shock.

"Prince Blueblood!" she stammered. "What are you... I mean, how can I help...?"

"Don't worry about it, Thistle." He trotted by her to check out more books, levitating a dozen colored bookmarks from a cup on his way past. "I know what I'm here for. Yes, everything's fine. No, this is just a private matter. Yes, I'll keep quiet. No, I won't be needing to make any copies. Also, can you have someone refill the coffee machine around ten o'clock?"

The charcoal gray mare blinked. A few times.

"Oh, and have them bring out fresh milk and crème, while they're at it. The stock in the backroom has spoiled." He waved back at her as he went about his business. "Ta!"

"Um..." She scratched behind her ear. "Yes... sir?"

...

"Oh ho? Since when could you project through walls?" Whitmane almost - almost - sounded impressed.

Blueblood grinned as he looked up at the old master. "I... did say I've been stud-"

"Don't go clopping yourself off already, colt," the grizzled Professor snapped, cutting him off. "Your distance is still subpar. And could you possibly bleed off more magic when you use that oversized pig-sticker on your forehead? What, do you think you're made of magic? Sloppy. Sloppy! And Wasteful!"

He groaned painfully.

"Oh sweet Celestia, you're making me wish I'd retired! Again, colt!" Whitmane stomped a withered old hoof. "And do it without making my teeth ache. Are you trying to teleport yourself or blow up the room as you leave?"

...

Blueblood hummed happily to himself as he finished his tea (milk. ginger.)

"My goodness, nephew," Celestia remarked, after observing his curiously good mood for a few discrete minutes. "You do seem quite chipper this morning."

He offered her a mysterious smile.

"I've been waiting for today," he replied. "For quite some time now."

"For the Gala, you mean?" Proper Place guessed.

"Yes. The Gala." Blueblood clopped his hoof on the table gently. "That reminds me. I'd like to extend two invitations to Stylus, there-" He pointed to the Chamberlain's aide, the Keeper of Seals. "He's thinking of proposing to his fiancé, and the Gala is as good a time as any. Just do it before eleven o'clock."

The normally silent aide opened his mouth, but couldn't think of what to say.

"Yes, I know you two don't have anything to wear," Blueblood continued. "I've already sent one of my servants along to find you both something appropriate."

Stylus's stammered. "Sir... h-how...?"

"Long story. No time." Blueblood dabbed his lips with his napkin and pushed away from the table. "If you're excuse me, everypony, I've got a busy day."

...

Ponyville.

Finally.

Now, *at last*, for the hard parts.

Blueblood started with what should have been the easiest of the six. Softly humming the silly little tune these same mares would sing later tonight before the castle gates, the time-looped Prince plotted out just what he had to do. Come hell, high water, or Celestial menopause he would make at least one Gala work. For peace of mind if nothing else, he had to try.

This meant (he was sure of it) dealing with the six Elements of Harmony.

Miss Rarity would theoretically be the easiest. According to the information he'd gathered, she had gone to the Gala specifically to find him and to fall in love. In the first run through (and quite a few more) he had rather decisively smashed her expectations of the night by being his usual self.

Darkly, Blueblood still considered some of the stunts he pulled back then kind of amusing. Rarity was a beautiful mare, and supposedly very generous (according to that Wonderbolt crazy pegasus, the friendship letters he had read, and the others who knew her) but she also rather reminded him of his mother and the usual coterie of mares he had to associate with in court. He just didn't particularly *like* noblemares. He had resigned himself to marrying a daughter of one of the many rich or noble houses of Equestria, but it didn't mean he would make it easy for her. If his mate-to-be was going to be a gold digger or a trophy, she could at least be a compliant one.

Or so he had thought.

Hence why, *theoretically*, making Rarity's Gala evening go right was the easiest of the six. All he supposedly had to do was act like she wanted him

to act: like a proper Prince and gentlecolt. He could even wine and dine her as necessary. It wouldn't be hard. But... it also raised other potential problems, mostly with the fact that her falling in love with him was rather different than them falling in love with each other. He could definitely act like he had fallen in love with her, but it would be just that: an act.

So: theoretically easiest. Theoretically.

Trial and error would have to fill in the rest.

Blueblood tapped his hoof, waiting for the door to open. True, he had dropped by uninvited and unannounced (that could be fixed next time), but honestly, how long was it taking for her to get sufficiently ready to answer his summons. The two loaned Royal Guard pegasi who had flown him to Ponyville were milling close by, not guarding him as much as they were the chariot. The Prince glanced down at himself and wondered if he had overdressed slightly with the change to formal wear.

Finally, the door opened... and a little filly with a pink and purple two-toned mane appeared.

The two ponies stared for a few seconds.

"You're not Miss Rarity," Blueblood stated, peering at her. "Or are you?"

"No she isn't!" a voice came from within the Boutique.

"I'm Sweetie Belle!" the little filly stuck out her hoof, then, thinking better of it, remembered her manners and bowed slightly. Nothing like the groveling and kowtowing that was expected whenever a real royal showed up.

Blueblood stared at the polite little filly.

He... just couldn't help it...

"I am Prince Blueblood. Tell me, Sweetie Belle, is your **mother** home?"

...

Blueblood composed himself. No jokes this time.

"I'm Sweetie Belle!" the adorable little filly, just like before, first thought about trying to shake hands before remembering to bow in greeting. No jokes this time. No jokes this time. No jokes this time.

"I am Prince Blueblood. Tell me, Sweetie Belle, would you like to go to the Gala with me?"

...

Okay. Seriously.

No jokes this time.

"I'm Sweetie Belle!"

"I am Prince Blueblood. Tell me, Sweetie Belle, is your sister home? I would dearly like to ask her something."

There: Blueblood felt quite proud. No need to make yet another hard reset of reality.

"Oh, um." The green eyed filly glanced back at the door, not really sure what to say. "She's..." Sweetie Belle answered slowly and hesitantly. "...here."

"Hm." Normally, he would have found something to amuse himself while he waited for the lady of the house to put her face on, so to speak. However, he had a lot to do today. Everything had to be ready before the Gala. Even during it. There was a very tight schedule.

"If you could," he asked, floating down a bouquet of flowers picked up on his way out of Canterlot. "Could you please give these to your sister and ask her if she is amenable to my escorting her to the Gala tonight?"

Sweetie Belle's mouth made an "o" and she giggled like, well, a schoolfilly.

"A-mean-i-ble means... what?" she asked innocently, as a vexed sound came from inside.

"It means consenting," he told her with a friendly smile. "Willing."

Proving a bit more clever than she appeared, Sweetie Bell stole a look back at the door, and the Boutique where her sister was feverishly trying to look presentable. If Rarity was like most mares Blueblood knew, she spent a good chunk of every morning getting herself presentable. Well, he did as well! Today was a bit special. He had skipped out on all but the essentials.

"I'm pretty sure she'll say yes," Sweetie Belle guessed.

"Good. I was thinking of having a chariot pick her up, but apparently she'd prefer to ride with her friends." He shook his head; no need to share that bit of information. "Just tell her to be ready by eight."

"Bye!" The little filly waved cheerily as he hurried to his next engagement.

Yes: Rarity would theoretically be the easiest of the six. All he had to do was not ruin her night while also possibly convincing her that she didn't want to marry into his family. If his harridan of a mother had been alive, Blueblood was sure that would have been much easier. He'd work out those particulars later.

The fashionista (part 1) was ready.

The stage was set.

Now for the *Element of Laughter*.

Chapter 3

Sugar Cube Corner.

Despite the gingerbread-imitation exterior, it was a fairly common pastry shop. Then again, compared to spending one drunken night at a seedy Trottin' Donuts Shop it was fairly high class. Princess Celestia herself had also graced it with her presence once before, making it effectively haute couture. The sad and pathetic truth was that Celestia could visit a country outhouse and the nobles would quickly call it a "Petite Trianon" and squabble over the right to visit.

More importantly, Sugar Cube Corner was also the residence and working place of the cake launching, party-crazy stage-diver at the Gala. One 'Pinkamena Diane Pie.' She was the next stop after Rarity's, and he expected it to take a few more loops to work out how to handle her. The important thing was to test the waters due to its proximity to the Carousel Boutique. On his final run, he needed to conserve as much time between stops as possible.

It was still early morning, and the pastry shop was having the normal business rush that such places enjoyed as ponies tried to use sugar and caffeine to prepare for their day. Blueblood quickly undid his tie and loosened his collar. It wouldn't do to appear too stuffy with this one. A part of him was always a little nervous coming to places like this: he didn't handle hyperactivity well, and the Element of Laughter was... a tad unstable and unpredictable. Even for him.

Hushed whispers preceded his entering the store.

"Welcome to Sugar Cube Corner," a motherly looking Earth pony in pastel colors began to say, only to have her eyes widen in recognition. "Prince... B-"

"Sorry to skip ahead, but I need to borrow Miss Pinkamena for a minute or two." *Of course, it was rude to not order something.* "When you can, I'll also have a cupcake with almonds... and add a whole strawberry on top, cut lengthways, not whole, if you would?"

Not that it was easy to see all the sweets in such a store, and not be reminded of that disgraceful binge he had gone through... how many loops ago? Two hundred maybe? Auntie Luna had been right. So very right.

Now, all he had to do was-

"Hi!"

Halfway into sitting at one of the indoor tables, Blueblood nearly jumped out of his skin. Impossibly, some pony was actually staring at him, upside down. Was she perched on his head? It didn't feel like it. Was she hanging from the ceiling like one of Luna's bats? He never got to see how the mare pulled the trick off, because a second later she was seated opposite him, her hooves placed innocently on the table.

This was the pink terror of the Gala.

She seemed harmless enough. Earth pony. Bright pink coat and brighter pink mane. Aqua blue eyes, about the same color as his own. At least she was sitting still and not bouncing around. Balloons for a cutie mark. Which explained a few things.

"You must be Miss Pinkamena," he stated, and held out his hoof. "The Element of Laughter."

She giggled and shook his hoof with both of her own. Her mouth also started to work at high speed: "Wow-wee! You know about that? You must be a pretty smart pony! But I guess you are from Canterlot, just like Twilight, and Twilight's the smartest pony I know! Everypony is saying you're a Prince, but you don't have any wings, just a horn, so how can you be a Prince? Oh! Or is it just a name, like the Fresh Prince, or the Artist formerly known as Prince? Are you an artist?"

"Actually-"

"But then again, if you were a Prince, then I guess it makes sense that you'd know ALL about the Elements of Harmony! Because you're like the Princess's brother, or maybe her nephew, or her illegit-"

"Don't," he spoke up, cutting the motor-mouth off. "I'm her nephew. I don't have wings because I'm just a unicorn. How did you know I was from Canterlot?"

Pinkie tilted her head in bubbly confusion. "Where else would a Prince be from, silly?"

"... I suppose."

"So what'd you want to see me for?" the bundle of energy asked. "Oh! One second!" She literally bounced away, out of sight, and then came back from the other side, this time balancing a platter on the tip of her nose. On it were two cupcakes of the sort he had just ordered.

"I only ordered one..." he began to protest.

"Everyone gets one free the first time they visit!" Pinkie assured him, putting the plate down on the table. "Okie Dokie! Ready to listen now!"

"Yes. To the point," Blueblood agreed. "I'm here because of the Gala."

"OooOOooh." Pinkie's blue eyes began super wide and she smiled. "Are you asking me to the Gala?"

"I - eh - what?" He coughed. "What? You didn't ask that last time!"

"I didn't? Heeeey!" She peered at him closely. "What do you mean 'last time?'"

Blueblood growled in frustration. This wasn't working right at all.

"I'm repeating the same day over and over," he growled. "The last time I talked to you, you said something different."

Pinkie Pie crossed her front legs and nodded. "That sounds like me, alright!"

He just facehoofed.

"So what'd you want to see me for?" the bundle of energy asked. "Oh! One second!" She literally bounced away, out of sight, and then came back from the other side, this time balancing a platter on the tip of her nose. On it were two cupcakes of the sort he had just ordered.

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"Yes. To the point," he agreed. "I'm here because of the Gala."

"OooOOooh." Pinkie's blue eyes began super wide and she smiled. "Is there something wrong with the Gala?"

"Again with this..." He muttered. The question worked, though. "Yes, as a matter of fact there is."

"It's a balloon shortage, isn't it?" Pinkie slammed a hoof on the table, leaning forward to whisper. "Of all the times to suffer from a rubber embargo!"

"Ah. No." He carefully pushed her back into her seat. "Let me explain."

Pinkie cocked her head again, listening.

"I've heard from... Twilight... that you're Ponyville's most well known and well respected party planner." Kind of a lie, but whatever. He then asked, "This is correct, isn't it?"

"Yep!" Pinkie enthusiastically replied. "That's me! Ponyville's number one party pony!"

"You must be very excited about going to the Gala then?"

"I'm super *duper* excited! After I finished work, I was going to bounce on my new trampoline to work off some of my bouncy-energy! Have you ever had that feeling when you just need to go way up and then way down and then way up and then way down again? Because I get that ALL THE TIME. The trampoline helps, but sometimes it makes it even worse. Bouncing higher and higher and higher usually works, though! Did you know I've heard that

there are entire castles designed for bouncing? Bouncy Castles they're called! Hey! Do you have any of those in Canterlot? Can you get one for the Gala!"

"I'll take all that to mean: yes, I am excited about going to the Gala."

"Pretty excited," Pinkie clarified.

He nodded. That much was obvious. "I take it you haven't been to a Gala before, Miss Pinkamena?"

"Ummm. Nope!" She shook her head and her curly mane bounced while her body couldn't. "And you can call me Pinkie Pie!"

"Let me be frank with you..."

"Frank? I thought your name was Blueblood?"

"I trotted right into that one. Again. Let me be candid then."

Pinkie stared at him evenly. "... Candid isn't a name!"

He coughed, cleared his thought and continued: "A Gala is a very specific sort of party. A very formal party."

This - the mention of parties - got Pinkie's attention and held it.

"Go on," she prompted.

"Have you been to any weddings before?" Blueblood asked, taking a moment to bite into the cupcake. It was low class food, but it was really quite good in a jejune sort of way. Sadly, the last year or so had turned him into a somewhat pedestrian pony when it came to his vices.

"Sure I have!" Pinkie held out her hoof and started counting on non-existent digits. "I went to my sister Inky's wedding, and Ditzzy Doo's, and Carrot Top's!"

"And what was your sister's wedding like?"

Pinkie thought back to that day, her lower lip sticking out in an exaggerated and adorable pout.

"Well... Daddy had all the family get together and we waited by this pretty blue river. And I had to be quiet and wear a boring old dress because I was a maid or something. And then Inky and Tanny said their vows." Pinkie smiled as she breezed past what was the boring part in her recollection. "And then they had a big kiss and they were married! And then we all went to this big tent and ate and danced and had tons of fun!"

"Did your father ever dance with your sister?" he asked, leadingly. "Before giving her to her new husband?"

"Yep!" Pinkie confirmed, nodding so vigorously her mane bounced.

"What kind of dance was it? Do you remember the music?"

Pinkie nodded again. "I remember alright! It was... um... a slow kinda music. All the married ponies were out dancing. And... I guess some who weren't married yet, too." She held up her hooves, and mimicked putting them in his shoulders. "They stood up and leaned on each other, and slowly moved around in circles."

"That," he stressed, lowering her hoof down to the table again. "Is the kind of music that is played at the Gala. It is also the kind of dancing at the Gala."

Pinkie seemed to need a few seconds to process that news.

"But," she protested. "But that's so boring..."

"Don't worry," he quickly assured her. "There is a more lively formalized dance, called the Marché."

"Mar-chae?" the pink pony didn't sound convinced.

"Marché," he repeated. "Coincidentally, I happen to have brought a book on it, with some of the simpler moves highlighted, and I can show you how to start. You'll be enjoying the Gala - properly - in no time. Doesn't that sound fun?"

Pinkie Pie wasn't quite frowning, but she was looking somewhat distraught. Her puffy mane even began to droop a little. The gears turned and a serious look crossed her face as she thought back to her sister's wedding,

replaying that one part in particular over and over. Back then, when all the other pony couples had danced, she had had to wait and watch from her table. Even Blinky had danced after finding a colt who was a friend of the groom.

"Every party is a little different, after all," Blueblood reminded her. "How do you know you won't enjoy it if you don't give it a try?"

That seemed to do the trick.

"You're right," Pinkie said, to him and to herself. "You're right! If the Gala was the same as any old party, then it wouldn't be so special, now would it? I'll definitely learn how to dance and how to party, Gala-style!"

"Thank Celestia!" Blueblood breathed a sigh of relief... and then patted her hoof again. "I mean, thank goodness. I didn't... bring that book... for nothing?"

She met his shifty eyes with her own. For a moment or two, he even got the impression that she sensed something was amiss. Blueblood put on his most charming and suave grin to disarm her suspicion. It usually worked wonders on mares, but with this one, the odds were about fifty-fifty. One of her ears twitched.

"Okie dokie lokie." Then, abruptly, she was all smiles and bubbles and balloons again. "And I can teach you how to do the pony polka!"

"...ah. wonderful..."

Blueblood spent much of that loop getting a feel for how quickly he could pass on the formal dancing techniques of the court to Ponyville's resident candy-consuming party loon. He also spent about the same amount of time in the next loop doing the same. By the third iteration, however, he had learned just how to most efficiently make progress on that front.

He brought a record of a typical Marché dance piece, Dance of Sagittarius in D minor, and had her practice. Despite appearing to have the attention span of a hyperactive filly, she was actually very astute when she put her mind to things. The only real annoyance was her unpredictability. No other

pony he had ever encountered, in hundreds of Gala loops, was still so able to surprise him. It was strange, but manageable.

Pinkamena picked up Marché quite readily, once she had spent an hour or so listening to the music, understanding the thematic beats that determined the required steps, and after seeing him set an example. It was really quite elementary in principle: most Equestrians couldn't stand on two legs for very long. Miss Pie being an apparent exception. Due to this physical limitation, unless a pair of ponies supported one another, most dances longer than a minute or so had to be done on all fours. Marché was all about movements in synch with one's partner: left, right, back, forward, pirouette left, pirouette right, slide and reverse.

In the process, he had also learned more than he'd ever feared about common music.

No matter: the party prodigy would be ready.

Generosity - check.

Laughter - check.

Blueblood considered the latter the most challenging of the six, and it was a relief to have it finally sorted out. He'd refined that part of the plan down to two and a half hours spent in Ponyville. A little over his most idealistic projections, but well below what he had feared. The next major obstacle was to be found outside town. Past the rough roads of Ponyville, and into the countryside.

He raised an eyebrow at the dirt on his hooves.

'Ugh.'

Not that he hadn't been through worse. Those loops where he had killed himself in a variety of ways had left a no less pleasant impression. That one time he had jumped in front of a train must have made quite the mess, to say nothing of his swan dive off Canterlot's highest spire. It wasn't really the dirt that bothered him. It was just symptomatic of the problem ahead.

Sweet Apple Acres.

It was larger than he had expected. Land was at a premium in Canterlot, and as part of his Royal Office, Blueblood had overseen the distribution and zoning of thousands of square miles. He knew a large and expensive piece of land when he saw one, on a map or on the ground. Sweet Apple Acres was just such. He had looked up the actual size long before coming, and checked the legal limits of the family's acreage. They actually owned farmland right up to the border of Everfree itself.

Gutsy.

He would've walled off his property from that savage nightmare forest.

Once again, the change of targets necessitated a quick change in clothes; fortunately he was a unicorn. Stowing both the dress shirt and the formal wear, he instead wore a coat, shirt and brown gloves. He had no intention, under any circumstances, of not at least looking passably dressed, regardless of where his new outlook on life took him. At the same time, it didn't take an RAAS valedictorian to realize that showing up at this farm in courtly clothes would hurt his cause.

Before he could approach the farmhouse that dominated the property, he passed under an iron gate with no doors: probably intending to both state that the land one was entering was welcoming, but quite strictly owned and managed. It reminded him a bit of the arches in the Palace Garden. He half expected there to be more workers, or even a contracted guard or two. Instead, as he passed by rows of apple trees, he met not a pony.

Not until he encountered a red-coated fellow in the middle of the path.

"Howdy," the farmpony spoke with that clear, rustic accent. "Can I help ya with anythin'?"

"You may," Blueblood replied, raising a gloved hoof in greeting. "I am Prince Blueblood. I have come to speak with Miss Applejack."

The red workhorse chewed on a stalk of straw.

"Yer the Prince?" he finally asked, skeptically.

"Quite," Blueblood huffed. "I suppose I'll be more persuasive next time."

...

"Howdy," the farmpony spoke with that clear, rustic accent. "Can I help ya with anythin'?"

"You may," Blueblood replied, raising a gloved hoof in greeting. Next to him, one of the Royal guard pegasi stared forward with professional indifference. "I am Prince Blueblood. I have come to speak with Miss Applejack."

The red workhorse chewed on a stalk of straw.

"Yer the Prince?" he finally asked, skeptically.

"Again with this?" Blueblood asked, expression slipping for a second. "I am a Prince of Equestria, yes. This is about the Gala tonight."

The apple farmer rolled the stalk between his teeth. This 'Macintosh' was a big lug; a tad larger than Blueblood himself, and the size of a full fledged Royal Guard. They clearly bred them like bulls out here.

"I'll get her," he finally said, and headed to the house.

His initial impression of the Element of Honesty, upon first seeing her, was that she was in need of some serious polish. Hell's bells, she was about the opposite of every mare he had ever encountered in Canterlot. Applejack was fit and strong, but not in the manufactured way that came from spending time at a gym or with a personal trainer (in his case). It may just have been near-legendary earth pony vitality at work coloring his impression - they did say, once you went earth pony, you never went back - but she was just such a raw specimen. Sandy and Light Touch would have had a field day getting this mare ready for the Gala.

Still, she was pretty in a rugged country way. Green eyes, golden mane, straw coat. Good coloration. The ponytails, though, were just so... utilitarian! Luckily, he already knew beforehand that she knew well enough to adjust her attire for the Gala. Or perhaps one of the others had insisted? It was auspicious for him; all he has to do was convince her to make some changes to what she brought to sell at the Gala.

"Well, howdy!" Applejack tipped her hat just a bit, and too-readily shook his hoof. "Ain't this a surprise; what's a Canterlot noble like yerself doin' way out here?"

Her brother picked that moment to lean over and whisper something in her ear.

"He is?" She asked the big red pony, and blinked, giving Blueblood another more cautious look. "This ain't about the border, is it?"

"The border?" the Prince asked, a little thrown by the question. "Why... would you assume that?"

"Ya'll are the head of the Royal surveyin' and map makin' office, ain't ya?" Applejack pointedly inquired. "Don't tell me we're losing another couple'a acres ta Everfree!"

Blueblood's mind raced, and he did recall something about that.

"Oh," he realized, a gloved hoof hiding his eyes. "That was... oh sweet Celestia, of course this would be *that* farm next to the forest..."

"That's right. 'Bout five years ago, one'a yer colts came by and told us he was extendin' the border of the forest!" Applejack stamped an indignant hoof on the wooden floor. "We lost a whole crop'a our best apple trees. That whole place is just a mess 'a shrubs now, just one big sump, and we can't do nothin' about it."

This was not where he wanted the conversation to go today.

"You have my apologies for that," he tried to be diplomatic. "But I don't make a habit of questioning our surveyors. As I recall, the border needed to be straightened out. Your property just happened to be in the way. You must have been compensated..."

"Yer surveyor gave us a hundred bits per acre lost. My grandpappy paid twice that for it a hundred years ago! Apple Acres isn't the only family that's been given the shaft neither!" Applejack, now set on her tirade, didn't even seem inclined to let him inside the house.

"I'm sure there's a very good reason..."

"Didn't ya'll actually read any o' tha complaints we been sendin' ya?" The Element of Harmony advanced on his noble self, glaring at him eye to eye. "What brought ya out here, anyway?"

"Um.. the... Gala?"

It seemed like it had been a while since he returned to his study.

Blueblood ground his teeth together in frustration, digging out the Everfree maps. He was Grand Veneur, which meant he decided the protected status of Equestria's wildlands. Some of these were areas set aside for natural beatification, some were national parkland, and others were pure wild lands like Everfree. Technically, they were all game preserves under the ownership of the Crown. Sometimes the borders of these lands were extended, other times they were contracted, depending on the needs of the country, local communities, and the financial state of the department.

One would think it a prestigious office, but really Blueblood didn't do very much. He had final say on work others did, and that was really it. A hundred other ponies actually went out and did the survey work, compiled their results, sent them through a committee, and then he rubber stamped their decisions. If he was lucky, then groups or individuals would approach him to have the Office of the Veneur fund expeditions to exotic lands, but that sort of thing was few and far between.

It didn't take too long to bring up the current Everfree Map, and ones from previous surveys.

There wasn't much any difference between the borders twenty years ago and ten years ago. There was an allotted expansion away from inhabited areas eight years ago - a patch job to connect some wild areas that had been isolated by an earlier fire. Then, five years ago, the Everfree began expanding again, this time into Ponyville. No where else. Just the countryside around Ponyville.

The survey noted that the growths required an adjustment of the border, and the recommended extension of the forest into one set of farmland and then another. It was never very substantial. Last year, though, it had cumulatively justified a redaction of the border elsewhere, the new land

being allotted to one of Hoofington's Agricultural Companies. That was a tad suspicious.

Rather more suspicious was that the same surveyor was responsible for every expansion around Ponyville. Other surveyors sent never recommended a change in the border. Not once.

"This is just wonderful." Blueblood sat back in his study, and sent a servant to retrieve one of his aides.

Right Angle was a studious unicorn, and unlike Blueblood, a natural hard worker. The mousy orange mare quickly answered her employer's summons, arriving with the requested records in her saddlebags. He didn't even need to go through them himself. Right Angle had done so on her way over.

Blueblood held up one of the letters Applejack had mentioned yesterday. It was an independent survey conducted by a private company, placing the value of the land at more than twice what Apple Acres had been compensated for. The letter had been marked as CONSIDERED and then filed away to collect dust. It wasn't the only one either.

He would have thrown a fit... if not for the fact that he'd be doing this exact same thing tomorrow.

And probably every following day, at this rate.

"Right Angle," he said. "Take a note."

"Howdy," Big Mac spoke with that clear, rustic accent. "Can I help ya with anythin'?"

"You may," Blueblood replied, raising a gloved hoof in greeting. Next to him, one of the Royal guard pegasi stared forward with professional indifference. "My name is Prince Blueblood, of the Office of the Grand Veneur. I'd like to talk to the head of Sweet Apple Acres, if you please."

The red workhorse chewed on a stalk of straw.

"Eyup," the farmpony was all business. "This way."

Once again, Prince Blueblood found himself before the Apple Family farmhouse. Once again, he waited patiently as Big Mac entered and called out for the younger mare who ran the business. Quite literally. The deed and title had passed onto her at her age of maturity. Blueblood was himself a little perplexed by this. As eldest, the title should normally have gone to Mister Macintosh as the family's first born. In Equestria, this was historically the right of female primogeniture, but there was nothing barring a first born male from inheriting these days, even among the most old fashioned of aristocratic houses.

It was also... somewhat impressive that this young mare had run a business from such a young age.

There she was - entering from around a corner. Like before, her brother pulled her aside to whisper something. Blueblood had a good idea what they were talking about this time.

"Well, howdy," Applejack said and politely tipped her hat just a bit. She was a little more hesitant with it came to shaking his hoof. Things were turning out a different in this loop.

"Ain't this a surprise," she told him, her tone betraying growing suspicion. "What's a Canterlot bigwig like yerself doin' way out here? What's this about the borders now?"

"After a recent internal audit, the Office of the Veneur has determined that one of our surveyors has conducted his duties improperly and in violation of our code of ethics. We-" Blueblood motioned back to his guard. "Are making a quick trip to some of the families that have been victimized to... apologize. You have my personal word that we will compensate you properly for the lands lost."

"Well!" Applejack smiled, glancing back at her brother. She dipped her hat again to conceal her grin, trying to act equally professional but still hospitable. "Ain't that something? Sure took you folks long enough!"

"It only came to my attention recently," Blueblood admitted. "But it has prompted me to take a more careful look at the activities of my subordinates."

"Shame we won't be gettin' the acres back."

"I'm afraid that can't be arranged at the moment. Everfree has an allotted absolute acreage that must be maintained at all times in order to support the ecosystem."

"Wouldn't matter too much anyway at this point," Applejack replied, and stepped aside. "I know ya must be right busy, if yer gonna be meetin' with other families 'round here, but it's the least I can do ya invite ya inside for a drink and a bite ta eat."

"Thank you very much, Miss Applejack."

Yes! *He was inside!*

So far so good!

"Uhm, is he...?" Applejack noticed the Guard had turned around to stand next to the door instead of coming inside the farmhouse.

"You mean Mercury? Don't take it as an insult," Blueblood assured her. "Duty and 'ever watchful' and all that."

"Ah suppose," Applejack quickly moved on, and led him to a simple sitting room. Blueblood sat, paying only marginal attention to his surroundings. He had prepared for this. It was time to make good on things. Dealing with this apple farmer was far more troublesome than he had first thought.

He did notice, however, another member of the Apple clan: a little filly, about the same age as Rarity's sister. The filly's hair was a bright, deep crimson. Apple-colored, he supposed. And why wasn't that a surprise?

"Howdy," the little filly greeted him with a friendly smile.

"Hello," he studiously replied, giving the tyke no further attention. "Just a coffee is fine, Miss Applejack," he raised his voice a bit to make sure she heard him. "I was also hoping to speak with you about the Gala this evening."

"The Gala?" the Element of Honesty asked. "Well, alright. Just gimme a minute here."

"Very well, we-" Blueblood paused, raising his front leg as he noticed the little gold and red filly poking around his side, rudely pushing aside his coat to reveal his cutie mark. "-what are you doing?"

"That's a weird cutie mark." She poked one of the golden spokes of his compass rose with her hoof, and then one of the silver points. "Is it a star, like Twilight's?"

"Apple Bloom," Big Mac chided her from where he stood close by.

"It is a compass rose," he informed her, only now realizing she was a blank flank herself. "Though in old times, it was also known as a Star of the Sea."

"So it ain't like a real star?" Apple Bloom backed away, letting his coat fall back over half of the mark on his flank. "What's it mean, then? How'd you get a star that ain't a star as yer cutie mark?"

"Bloom," Mac reproved her again, this time with a faint frown on his seemingly unflappable face. "Ya shouldn't go badgerin' guests about their cutie marks. You know that." He shifted the straw from one side of his mouth to the other, eyes falling on the Equestrian Prince. "Sorry 'bout that."

"No," Blueblood replied. "It's alright." He brushed back the coat again so the filly could see the whole mark. "The compass represents the cardinal points: north, east, south, west, and the degrees in-between."

"But what's it *mean*?" Apple Bloom pressed, pouting at having a technical explanation but no useful context. "How'd ya get it?"

"It means my special talent is in finding directions," he answered. Really, he wasn't sure what his cutie mark really represented. It was probably nothing more than an affinity for and skill with maps. "As for how I got it..."

The blank flank filly's eyes lit up at the promise of finding out a new way to get a cutie mark.

"I got little lost one day," Blueblood told her.

Apple Bloom blinked a few times, expecting more.

"That's it," he finished.

"That can't be it!" she protested. "You got a cutie mark by gettin' lost? Ah get lost all tha time and Ah never got a cutie mark from it!"

"I did find something while I was lost, but it wouldn't make much sense to you, I'm afraid," he explained, just as Applejack entered with a cup of coffee. It was black coffee, too, much stronger than he normally bothered with.

"Ah. Next time, I'll remember to ask for milk and crème..." He took the cup with a slight nod of thanks. "You do have milk and crème, don't you?"

"We're on a farm, sugar cube," Applejack sat opposite with her own cup. "We've got more milk and crème than you can shake a hoof at."

"Of course." He took a sip, and got down to business with the Apples. "Miss Applejack. The other matter I wanted to discuss with you..."

"About the Gala?"

"Yes."

"What about it?"

"It has come to my attention that you intend to use the occasion to sell some of your wares," he began.

"Who told ya that?" Applejack interrupted.

"One of..." He searched for a name. "Your friends?"

"Twilight?" Applejack helpfully provided the name of which of her comrades knew about her plan. "What's that girl doin' flappin' her gums about that?"

"Well," Blueblood continued, undeterred. "About your wares. As one of the nobility myself, I thought I could pass on some ideas on how to better present your... many apple dishes."

"Now just hold on a second!" Applejack put down her cup, objecting to his invitation. "Sweet Apple Acres down-home apples are plenty good for even the most picky high society types! You sayin' ah won't be able to sell our

delicious, hoof made fritters or our signature dumplings or our fresh-as-you-come caramel apples at this here hoity-toity get together?"

His eyebrow twitched in irritation.

"I'm sure your *carnival fare* goes off well here in Ponyville, but..." He sighed, just then realizing what he had blurted out. "Oh. Nuts."

...

"Ah. Extra milk and crème..." He took the cup with a slight nod of thanks. "Thank you."

"We're on a farm, sugar cube," Applejack sat opposite with her own cup. "Enjoy."

"Now, if I may." He took a sip, and got down to business with the Apples. "Miss Applejack. The Gala."

"What about it?"

"It has come to my attention that you intend to use the occasion to sell some of your wares," he began.

"Who told ya that?" Applejack interrupted.

"One of your friends."

"Twilight? What's that girl doin' flappin' her gums about that?"

"Well," Blueblood continued, coming again to the point of this whole endeavor. "About your wares. I believe I have a good idea of what sorts of... apple-tastic treats... you wish to sell at the Gala. Fritters and candy-coated apples and pies and fried dumplings and such?"

"Right on the money, there," Applejack confirmed. "We've got a load of Sweet Apple Acres' finest packed and ready for sale tonight. Gonna make a killing, who-nelly!"

Eyep. Sure you were.

"How much, exactly, do you expect to make?" he asked, setting down his cup and saucer.

The country mare nodded to herself as she crunched the numbers. "Well, sir, we got some repairs to do on the western barn, and of course Granny needs a new hip. She's upstairs sleepin' - poor gal. All in all, I was hopin' fer a hundred bits at least. Two hundred'd be real nice, but that's probably bein' optimistic."

Blueblood chuckled.

"Well," he enthusiastically announced. "That's hardly much at all! I could give you that right now!"

...

Okay. *That* hadn't worked.

Stubborn mare.

"...we've got a load of Sweet Apple Acres' finest packed and ready for sale tonight. Gonna make a killing, who-nelly!"

Indeed.

"How much, exactly, do you expect to make?" he asked, setting down his cup and saucer.

The country mare nodded to herself as she crunched the numbers. "Well, sir, we got some repairs to do on the western barn, and of course Granny needs a new hip. She's upstairs sleepin' - poor gal. All in all, I was hopin' fer a hundred bits at least. Two hundred'd be real nice, but that's probably bein' optimistic."

Blueblood took a calming, slow breath. In, and out.

"Miss Applejack," he said. "While I don't doubt your skills as a salesmare or the quality of your apples here, I would remiss if I didn't let you know that apples are considered out of vogue among Canterlot nobility."

"Ah'll just have to bring them back into *vogue* then, Prince Blueblood." Applejack spoke with a little heat there. "Don't tell me yer one of those fancy types too good for a simple country apple?"

"Ah," he stumbled in his response for a second. "No. I have no problem with apples myself. In fact, I rather enjoy them from time to time."

"Really?" The country mare gave him a shrewd look. "What's yer favorite type'a apple then?"

"Calville Blanc d'hiver," Blueblood easily answered. "We have them imported from Prance."

The family was silent...

"Cheva-what now?" Apple Bloom wondered.

"Well, shoot!" Applejack appeared mollified by his response, tipping back her hat in a relaxed manner. The Equestrian Prince released a breath he'd been holding.

"Ah guess it makes sense a high class pony would be used ta high class apples," she reasoned, thinking aloud. "Calville Blanc, huh? You know, we've got some reeeal sweet Golden Delicious apples a field over. Same kinda taste n' texture. Granny used'ta make open faced tarts with em, and flan, too."

"Oh?" he inquired, genuinely curious now. "You don't make those anymore?"

"They didn't sell too well in town," Applejack explained with a casual shrug. "So we just switched ta selling 'em as a snack. They also don't keep too well."

"One must adapt to one's marketplace," he cautiously ventured, feeling a little give in the Element of Honesty.

"Eyup," it was Big Mac who spoke up then. "You suggestin' we make tarts for the Gala, then?"

"As I may have said before, Carn-" He just caught himself. "Most apple dishes are simply not in style this year. If you wish to sell at the Gala, then you would be wise to either make something exotic or decadent... or better yet, both."

Brother and sister gave each other a quick look; a conversation in a glance.

"Boy howdy, you do sound like Rarity," Applejack replied with a laugh. "No wonder she was so ga-ga about meeting Princess Celestia's nephew."

Shifting uncomfortably, Blueblood covered his anxiety about that situation by taking another sip of country coffee. The milk and crème helped.

"I'll take that as a compliment," he finally said.

"Still," Applejack drawled. "It's too late to replace our stock for the Gala. It takes time to make these things, an' Granny Smith's the only one who knows how to make tarts. Ah can't recall much at all how she makes apple shortcrusts."

"Besides!" she exclaimed with a confident grin. "Once all those fancy ponies catch a whiff of our apple treats, their stomachs will do the rest!"

"Really," Blueblood drolly commented.

...

*"...Equestrian Girls, we're kinda magical!
Boots on hooves, bikinis on top!"*

"APPLES." A hoof smashed the radio, and Blueblood surged out of bed.

...

Kicking open the door, he stomped past the table of pony notables, heading straight for the kitchen while cackling madly. Proper Place seemed on the verge of speaking up, but his mouth closed up as he realized Blueblood had zero intention of actually sitting at the table to share breakfast with the rest of the Royal household. Luna in particular seemed to be watching the strange spectacle with wide, green eyes.

"Nephew," Celestia spoke up, and he paused at the dulcet, commanding tone.

"Auntie?" he asked, one hoof already opening the door to the pantry.

"Normally we eat at the table," she commented with a growing smile, and her spoon gestured towards her own bowl. Of oats. And...

"Apples," he muttered, slipping into the kitchen. "APPLES!"

"Ah guess it makes sense a high class pony would be used ta high class apples," Applejack reasoned, thinking aloud. " Calville Blanc, huh? You know, we've got some reeeal sweet Golden Delicious apples a field over. Same kinda taste n' texture. Granny used'ta make open faced tarts with em, and flan, too."

Blueblood nodded, knowingly. "You don't make those anymore?"

"They didn't sell too well in town," she explained with a casual shrug. "So we just switched ta selling 'em as a snack. They also don't keep too well."

"One must adapt to one's marketplace," he agreed.

"Eyup," Big Mac spoke slowly and thoughtfully. "You suggestin' we make tarts for the Gala, then?"

Blueblood's horn glowed, and he levitated out a small brown folder. "Let me be truthful with you, Miss Applejack, if that's alright?"

"Ain't no policy like honesty," the country mare replied. "What's that ya got there?"

"You may not know this, but I am one of the primary financial sponsors of the Gala being held in my Auntie's honor," he said, and floated out a pair of fine etched papers. "This is the menu for the Gala. The right side here being the set piece, seven course dinner options for guests, and the left being the buffet and *hors d'oeuvres*."

Applejack took the proffered menu and scanned through, starting with the right side.

"Well, I'll be. You should see some'a these fancy dishes here, Big Mac! Why, I ain't never even heard'a some of these..." She paused, as her eyes found the left side of the carte du jour: the recently updated buffet. Blueblood had to suppress an evil grin.

"What the hay?" Applejack held up the papers again, looking closer. "Apple fritters? Caramel Apples? Three varieties of apple dumpling? Apple fondue!"

Slowly, she lowered the evil, evil bill of fare.

"How much... did ya say it cost ta eat at the buffet?" she cautiously asked.

"The buffet is free," he told her, straight faced. "For all guests."

"Tarnation! They got everythin' here but apple pie and apple crepes! How am I supposed ta sell half my treats when any old pony can just walk into the next room and get the same thing for free?" She started to simmer, trying to think up a plan. "You wouldn't happen to know where yer chefs are gettin' these apples, do ya?"

"That's the awkward bit," Blueblood admitted with a helpless shrug. "I suspect those apples are being purchased from local retailers and middle-ponies."

"Local...?" Applejack buried her face in her hooves. "They're re-sellin' our own apples!"

"Quite," Blueblood remarked.

A little pony in the back of his head was cackling in manic glee.

"Well what the heck am I supposed to do now?" She handed the menu back, and he deftly returned it to it's folder, and then his saddlebag. "This is a right mess, is what it is!"

"I suspected as much," the Equestrian Prince held up a hoof for her attention. "And on my way over, I think I may have stumbled on a way to salvage the situation. Unless... you want me to just close the table providing the apple hors d'oeuvres? You wouldn't have any competition if I did so."

"You'd do that?" Applejack asked, starting to consider it. Then she saw Apple Bloom sitting next to him and listening closely. The honest cowgirl shook her head. "No. Nope! No thank ya. That's not how the Apple Family does business."

Blueblood smiled. "So I've heard. In that case, maybe... another approach to business?"

Eyes scanning the faces of her immediate family, Applejack held a hoof to her chin.

"Like what?"

"Simple," he replied. "For nobles at an occasion like the Gala, the actual taste of the food is really secondary to it's presentation. Ponies like myself are at the Gala to see others and to be seen. It is an elaborate display of influence and refinement. The finest dishes are the ones that give the impression of being... sinfully decadent."

"What's that mean?" Apple Bloom asked, wide eyes and innocent.

"Decadent," Applejack explained for the benefit of her little sister, scowling as she did so. "It means some foalish ponies like ta indulge themselves on silly things that they think are important. Like buying an expensive hat instead'a one that does it's job."

"I believe Miss Rarity would disagree," Blueblood argued. "But, yes. The important thing in this case is that the cuisine be both expensive and exclusive to the Gala."

"So yer sayin' I need ta dress up mah apples?" The apple farmer huffed. "I guess ah could make a cake or somethin-"

"NO CAKES."

Blueblood brought a hoof to his mouth and coughed a few times.

"Sorry," he tried again. "No cakes, please. I'm not... fond of cake."

Applejack raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "Ya don't say?"

"Instead," he proposed. "Since you already have quite a few pies, perhaps you could make them a bit like this?" He retrieved another picture, this one of a piece of pie on a platter. The dish itself was intricate, fine china, and the slice of pie was drizzled with bright caramel in a familiar shape, with lines that ran wastefully over the porcelain saucer below. Curls of shaved apple aligned the edges, not for eating - just for show.

"Ah get it!" Apple Bloom peeked across the table to see the picture. "It looks like Celestia's cutie mark!"

The filly knew her cutie marks.

"Could you make apple pie that looks like this?" he asked, disarming calm.

"Ah... ah suppose ah could..." Applejack didn't sound sure, but the reluctance was probably due to the appearance of the dish, rather than the difficulty of emulating it.

"Good." Blueblood let her keep the picture. "All you need to do is sell it at ten bits a slice."

The country mare's hat damn near flew off her head.

"Ten bits a slice!" she yelped, and quickly lowered her voice. "What kinda madpony would pay *ten bits* fer a slice a' pie? Ah was gonna sell a whole pie fer two bits!

"Oh, they'll buy it," Blueblood assured her, leaning forward to take one last polite sip of coffee. "And they'll whisper about how much they spent on it, and you'll sell out in an hour."

Applejack, left with few other options, reached up to press her hat down on her head.

"I guess... I guess ah could..."

Jackpot!

The apple farmer would be ready.

*"You'll be seeing Rain Booms!
Ooo-ooo-oooh!
Equestrian Girls, we're kinda magical!
Boots on hooves, bikinis on top!"*

...

Twilight Sparkle.

The Element of Magic. The purple coloration was actually quite exotic, the more Blueblood thought about it. He couldn't recall many unicorns with that rich, deep shade of the color around Canterlot, whereas white was quite common among the carefully bred noble families. Himself included. It was family tradition to always marry into proper bloodlines to ensure the perfect, bleached coat passed down through fifty two generations. It was supposed to be a sign of respect for one's ancestors and of proper adherence to the old ways.

Blueblood suspected everypony just wanted to look as much like Princess Celestia as possible.

"Prince Blueblood?" Sadly, he was greeted, not by a pretty purple unicorn, but by her little dragon assistant. The little serpent stared at him with narrow, unnaturally green eyes. He was a small specimen: Blueblood had encountered a few of his type over the years, especially at the Royal Academy. Naturally, he didn't have one himself. He had quite thoroughly failed that particular test of magic.

"You're the one who sent that letter this morning," Spike stated, unhappy with that fact. "Since when was my stomach on royal speed-dial?"

"It wasn't that uncomfortable, was it?" He looked down at the little dragonkin. "I'm still getting used to that spell."

"No worse than usual," Spike relented, and stepped aside. "Come on in."

Blueblood entered the quaint little library-in-a-tree. He had been quite impressed the first time he had done so - it was a feat of magic in and of itself to produce such a structure - but the novelty had worn off after enough loops. Nonetheless, the noblepony found it rather odd: the Ponyville library had a very, very eclectic array of books and scrolls, some

of which only existed as copies in the Royal Library itself. It was wholly out of place for such a small town like Ponyville.

His playful auntie's doing, no doubt.

"Spike!" Twilight called out from upstairs. "Have you seen Tenser's Tome of Tricks, Transmutations and Transformations?"

Case two, east wall, shelf six, thirteenth from the left.

"I'll get it!" Spike called back, already on his way, pausing only to adjust the sliding ladder that let him reach the higher shelves. "His 'highness' is here to see you."

"I'll be right there. Just get that book!"

As always, Blueblood noted the little dragon eyeing him warily.

"Hey," he said, ascending the ladder. "Are you taking Twilight to the Gala? How'd you two even meet?"

"I'm not here for Twilight specifically." He had learned, very quickly and quite readily, that the juvenile dragon had some sort of crush on Rarity. Making mention of being that unicorn's escort generally led to more trouble than it was worth. "You could say I'm accompanying all six of the Elements of Harmony."

"Because they're the Elements of Harmony?" Spike asked, retrieving Tender's Tome.

"I'm doing it for the good of the Gala," he replied with practiced ease. "And, yes, because they are the Elements of Harmony."

"You don't... you know?" Spike turned, book-in-hand, and jumped down. "*Like* any of them? Do you?"

"I hardly know them." He couldn't help but grin, as he added, "Why do you ask?"

"That's kinda a secret, pal. But..." Good lord, he was terrible at keeping secrets. Spike walked over, and whispered conspiratorially. "Let's just say I have my eye on one of them."

"Oh ho?" He couldn't help himself. "Let me guess: the graceful young pegasus?"

"Who?" Spike asked and stuck out his tongue. "No she isn't a pegasus!"

"Ah! The lively earth pony filly, then?"

"...who? Which one...? No!"

"Don't tell me?" He gasped in shock. "Miss Sparkle? How scandalous!"

"Gross, no!" Spike shook his whole body at the incestuous implication.

"Well, I suppose it's best I not know," Blueblood finished with a chuckle. "I am terrible with secrets."

Spike tucked the thick unicorn tome under his front leg and tried to compose himself. "Anyway, my point was: I was kind of hoping we could all spend time together. Me and the girls, I mean. I wanted to show them some of our old hang out spots in Canterlot!"

"Hm." Blueblood wondered aloud, "But doesn't Miss Dash wish to spend her time with the Wonderbolts?"

"Yeah, I guess..."

"I ran into Miss Pinkamena Pie earlier, and she claimed to be very excited about dancing."

"Yeah."

"This my also be a rumor, but isn't Miss Applejack planning to set up a food stall during the Gala?"

Spike frowned; a little petulantly, in Blueblood's opinion.

"I get it," he cut off any further remarks. "They all want to go do their own thing. Guess that leaves me to chat with the valet... or something."

"You don't have anything you want to do at the Gala?" Blueblood asked, honestly not knowing the answer to this one. "No one you want to see? No place you want to be?"

"This probably sounds silly," Spike said. "But I just want to be around my friends."

He set his jaw and sighed softly, seeing Twilight coming down from the upper rooms in the building. It was time.

"So do I sometimes," he whispered, just loud enough for Spike to hear.

Finally. It was time.

Rainbow Dash's squeal of excitement could be heard even over the sound of the hair dryers struggling to blow down Pinkie Pie's irrepressible mane. Ponyville's top flyer was already basically ready to go, her mane drying under a towel wrapped around her head. Never one to waste much time between prep and launch (countdowns were for sissies) she had nonetheless resigned herself to mostly waiting around while all of her friends burned the hours away getting ready.

But now?

She showed off the little ID-stub that she had freed from the letter taped to her cloud house this morning. It wasn't just a ticket to the Gala. She already had a basic admissions tab. This was a VIP pass to the private section of the party reserved for the Wonderbolts and their guests and family and fans!

Just thinking about it started to get her wings humming.

"It says here I can spend the whole night with any two Wonderbolts I want!" she exclaimed. "Any two!"

She stared hard at the little tag, currently laminated flat and with a small pin, all ready to attach onto her dress somewhere. It was her free pass; exactly what she'd wanted! With this one, little thing, she could stroll, carefree, into the private party of her idols. More than that!

"Any two! Any two Wonderbolts! And... they'll ALL be there!" She gasped, carefully pressing the ticket to her face. "I - I can't decide! Do you think 'any two' means... even Thunderhead himself? The Team Captain of the Wonderbolts? I couldn't... I mean... maybe I could? What would I even say to him?"

"Wait!" She realized. "Do you think they'll be retired Wonderbolts there, too? Oh my gosh! What if Sky Shade is there? She's. Amazing. **Amazing!**"

The cyan pegasus bit her lip. "But - wait - if I'm going to be spending the whole night with two Wonderbolts... maybe I should try and pick ones closer to my age? Hanging out with Thunderhead or Sky Shade or Raging Storm would be sooooo sweet, but... oh man, what am I going to do!"

"Prince Blueblood gave you that?"

Dash interrupted her bouts of vocal indecision to look over at her unicorn friend: Rarity was just finishing under one of the drying machines. Her hair glistened and shone as she started to curl it just right. A case with makeup and cosmetics was already open next to her. It was the look on her face that got Dash's attention however. She looked... a little confused, and clearly scrutinizing of all that she had heard this morning was taking some sort of toll.

Not that the weather mare saw the problem.

"I dunno," Rainbow admitted, going back to cooing at the VIP ticket. "It was just there on the front door of my house when I woke up."

"He did have a Royal Guard with him," Applejack reminded her friends. "Or maybe he knew that cloud-walkin' spell you used on us, Twilight?"

"He found the time to drop off a note at your house in the sky," Rarity surmised, then pointed at Applejack. "And he visited your farm..."

"And a couple others, I reckon," Applejack supplied.

"And he visited you, too?" Rarity turned her eyes on Twilight, who was currently under a dryer, with just the lower half of her face visible. "And... you, too, Pinkie?"

"He stopped by for a while." The normally bubbly pony was busy reading a book and tapping her left hoof in time to some unheard music. The rest of her response was muted by her muttering something about 'step-step-step, spin?'

"Everypony except Fluttershy," Rarity finished. It sounded like she wasn't sure how she felt about that. Her eyes wandered over to the bouquet of flowers she had brought to show off to her friends. The stalks were moistened in a tall glass, some of the paper wrapping removed to allow the flowers to drink and remain fresh a little longer. It was already filling the room with a faint but unmistakably sweet fragrance.

"Oh no. Not me," Fluttershy meekly replied, her hooves soaking in mineral water. "But that bouquet is just lovely. Glittering bellflowers and briarweave roses don't grow around here. Maybe... he got them from the Canterlot gardens?"

"You'll forgive me for looking a gift in the mouth, darlings," Rarity said, winding her hooves together nervously. "It all just seems too good to be true. I never imagined the stallion of my dreams would... well.. just walk right up to my door."

"It just seems..." She bit her lower lip. "Too convenient."

"Ah, yer just over-thinking things!" Dash blurted out, giggling to herself at the VIP pass as she tried to find a good place to wear it, moving it from her sides to her front and then to under her wings.

"When I spoke with him, he sounded very heavily invested in the outcome of the Gala tonight," Twilight added, ever the voice of reason and studied examination. "I think he thinks that we're guests of honor, due to the Elements of Harmony and what we did saving Princess Celestia and Princess Luna."

"That makes sense," Rarity grudgingly admitted. "You think he's doing this out of some sort of obligation?"

"What's it matter so much anyhow?" Applejack asked, helping Fluttershy dry off her hooves. "He seemed like a nice enough fella, and you know these noblepony types. They've always got some angle of their own. I'd bet he just wants ta make a good impression tonight."

"It matters because-"

Rarity didn't finish her objection, she just closed her eyes and floated over a pair of lashes.

"I think I understand," Fluttershy said, grimacing as Applejack spat on her hoof before wiping it clean. "You want him to like you for who you are."

"He asked if he could escort me to the Gala." Rarity looked at her reflection in the mirror, full of worry when it should have been excitement. "But something just doesn't feel... right. I'd expected it to be magical."

"Maybe it will be," Twilight assured her friend. "Just wait and see. Tonight is going to be..."

All six raised their voices: "The best night ever!"

Chapter 4

"Five. Four. Three. Two. One."

"*Hey!*"

A velvet glow enveloped the surprised earth pony as Melody found herself yanked back off her hooves, mid-conversation. It was unmistakably the result of magic, unicorn magic, and just as she started to yell for the responsible party to step forward, a large potted plant hit the ground, right where she had been standing. The mare's shocked expression grew as she realized she could have been under that when it fell.

Glaring up, she saw two pegasi looking sheepishly and worriedly down, the pot having slipped through their hooves on the way to the second floor of a nearby building. Worse, the plant in the pot had been a cactus! Honestly - a cactus of all things!

"Who-?" She glanced around, but didn't see any unicorn stepping forward to claim responsibility for the save.

...

Blueblood appeared with a pop of arcane magic. He still didn't particularly enjoy teleporting, but at least he had gotten good at it. Eventually. Or, as Whitmane would say, he was 'passable, but lacking in style.' Luckily an extravagant flurry of smoke, fire, dazzling lights or dancing leaves was not really needed to get the job done.

"Waaa!"

The sudden weight on his back yelped and he couched his legs to cushion the fall.

"You know, if you're going to practice flying, could you at least do it somewhere with adult supervision?" he grumbled, letting the troublesome foal jump down onto the ground.

"Thanks mister!" the orange filly shook her little wings - ones not quite up to the task of letting her glide yet. Scootaloo tilted her head to the size in puzzlement. "Do I know you?"

He shook his head. "I wish you did."

She quickly grabbed her red scooter and buzzed off. Literally.

"I'll see you tomorrow, you brat!"

...

The day's assignment had to be the most inane he had ever been given.

Not only had he been shoehorned into playing gofer and guard to the Princess's insufferable nephew, the crazy stallion had rushed them to Ponyville on little-to-no notice at all. The noble idiot was probably in some sort of panic regarding the Gala. Why, Mercury couldn't imagine. Something to do with those mares, he was willing to guess.

Crazy or not, though, Blueblood was still the Prince, and an Officer of the Royal Household to boot. That meant he had leeway to do things his way. It also meant that his orders, no matter how loony, had to be followed. Flying over to tape a surprise ticket to that one weathermare's house had been kind of a waste of time, but harmless and nice enough. He hadn't minded doing that.

Sitting on a cloud in the middle of the sky, hiding himself... not even over the damn town.

This was stupid.

What was he waiting for out here?

Mercury's ears twitched as he heard a commotion in the bushes below. Raising his head out of his personal cloud cover, he searched the ground for the source. There didn't appear to be much to see, but his sensitive ears definitely picked up what sounded suspiciously like a scuffle. A spark of magic exploded from behind a tree, providing the last positional clue.

"Curse you Twilight Sparkle! This is all your fault!"

That helped, too.

Taking off and circling around, Mercury saw what had been hidden below. A baby blue unicorn mare was stomping on the head of a cringing Diamond Dog while two others restrained her by her front legs. Mercury narrowed his eyes, gained some altitude, and adjusted the angle of his wings. This was the first time he had ever seen a Diamond Dog in the flesh. He only knew about them because of pictures in books and regs about encounters in the wild.

"Stupid pony, can't you just shut up and find jewels?"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie refuses to waste her natural magical talent digging up rocks!"

For a moment - *just a moment* - Mercury wasn't sure who he should be rescuing.

The moment passed, and he dove, twisting into a spiral as he snatched the unicorn out of the hands of her captors. Coincidentally, he also saved the Diamond Dog this poor, 'defenseless' unicorn had been relentlessly kicking in the head. The other two larger Diamond Dogs barked in outrage at losing their prize, but didn't seem inclined to put up a chase or fight about it.

Within seconds, Mercury was high in the air and out of reach anyway.

"I'll have you somewhere safe in a minute, ma'am." Royal Guards didn't normally speak, but there were exceptions. Mercury had a feeling this was one of them. The soft blue unicorn mare in his front legs went rigid for a second, only to relax as she threw her front legs around him, squeezing tightly.

"Ma'am? That's a little tight."

"The Great and Powerful Trixie doesn't like heights."

He didn't notice her furious blushing until after he tried to drop her off.

...

Blueblood teleported briefly, just in time to relieve his Guard.

"Sorry," he whispered, conspiratorially. "But that one was better left to you than me."

The six mares left Ponyville in their personal carriage, the result of Sparkle's transformation of an apple. Blueblood followed ahead in his own chariot at first before motioning for his guards to take to the air. The pair - chosen for dutifully not asking questions - did as ordered, circling around and to the rear. This close to Canterlot, a procession of carriages were starting to converge along the roads leading to the Palace.

One carriage, however, had encountered a spot of trouble.

Though an old and dignified heirloom, it had clearly seen better days. Pulled by two Earth ponies, it had not responded well to hitting a divot in the road, causing one of the wooden spokes in the front left wheel to break. It had been slugging along regardless on basically three good wheels, until eventually the two drivers stopped to try and work out some sort of temporary fix.

"Sir," one of the Guard pegasi rumbled as Blueblood's chariot came around to land.

"Yes, I know, I've heard it before," the Prince replied; it should have been a groan of despair, but there was a small smile on his face. His horn glowed as he jumped off the back, easily levitating up the afflicted quarter of the old carriage. A pair of elderly earth ponies stopped their muffled bickering about their plight to look out the stage coach's window.

"My word," the old mare of the pair gasped. "Is that...?"

The old gentlecolt recognized him, too. They both did. Every time. "Your Grace...!"

"Mister and Missus Clover, isn't it?" Blueblood asked, letting his magic do all the actual work. Already, he had a spare wheel out, just the right size (of course), and screws unwound as he removed the broken one. "We can't have ponies late to the Grand Galloping Gala, now can we? Just sit back and relax. I'll be done in a minute."

The two earth pony drivers just stared at the royal unicorn like he had more heads than a hydra.

"At the Gala. At the Gala," he hummed to himself as he worked. "This time. We'll have the best night ever. At the Gala..."

He arrived - naturally - right on time to precede the six mares of honor.

Looking none the worse for wear despite the little detour, Blueblood stepped off his chariot and took in the magnificent sight of Castle Canterlot, built into the side of the mountain like a hanging garden. Green field and hills stretched and rolled, dotted by perfectly maintained trees and rows of flowering bushes. A cascading waterfall framed the inward wing of the Palace, flowing eternally from a magical spring that recycled the water as it fell into the lake below. Golden spires and onion domes crowned white and pink marble towers behind the Regal Gate's main facade.

'I hardly ever looked at it from the outside, before today,' he realized. 'Whatever 'today' even means to someone like me.'

Ponies in all their finery stopped to bow graciously at his unannounced entrance.

Then, things got interesting, as the crimson red carriage behind his chariot opened.

"I can't believe we're finally here!" Twilight was the first to exclaim. Almost like magic, other ponies began to draw themselves towards the six mares, mesmerized by some sort of karmic magnetism. Blueblood stepped aside and out of the way. He didn't... feel it. Whatever strange force compelled these ponies to sing and dance, he just... didn't feel it.

He never did.

Even now. He didn't.

Still - he didn't let that small fact bother him. Everything was going swimmingly! Not too long ago, this song had driven him to the brink of insanity; hearing it every night just hammered home how helpless and trapped he was to live out this one day, this one night, over and over. To

never die or grow old or change the hand fate had dealt him time and time again. Now, this close to it, he found himself enjoying the spectacle.

"All our dreams and our hopes
From now, until here after...
All that we've been wishing for
Will happen at the Gala!

At the Gala!"

This time, different than before, that one unicorn singled him out. Flanked by a chorus of ponies - many of which Blueblood knew by name now - she demurely approached him, singing her verse:

"At the gala, all the royals...
They will meet fair Rarity!
They will see I'm just as regal at the Gala..."

"At the Gala!"

The look she was giving him was one Blueblood knew all too well. Infatuation. He'd seen it so many times in so many mares with starry eyed dreams of royal families and courtly romance. But there was no courtly romance. The royal family, such as it was, was a dreary sham. It was nothing to sing about. It was nothing any sane mare wanted a part of.

He had seen that look so many times, even before he began reliving this day.

For the first time, he felt truly terrible.

"I will find him, my prince charming," Rarity sang, slipping closer.
"And how gallant he will be!
And he'll treat me like a lady
To-night at the Gala!"

He lowered his head to just barely touch horns with her, his high spirits threatening to slip away.

"This is what we've been waiting for,
To have the best night ever.

Each of us will live our dreams
Tonight at the Gala.

At the Gala!"

"At the Gala," he whispered.

As she always did, Twilight ran ahead to meet with the Princess.

Celestia herself stood proud and tall at the prominent fork of the Oratory Chamber, greeting the long line of guests as they filed in to the Ménagerie. It was a grueling bit of showmareship that Blueblood knew his Auntie didn't particularly enjoy. Sadly, for her and for him, there was little either of them could do about it. It was a Gala ritual. Many ponies came solely to be greeted by the Princess herself.

He had told Twilight as much, and reminded her to be patient. Every Gala was the same for Celestia. Every Gala was a display. Blueblood was starting to realize, finally, why his aunt had invited the Elements of Harmony, knowing they would cause some sort of scene. It wasn't that she *hated* the Gala, as Blueblood had come to for a time. She just needed some small, tiny release from the repetition and monotony. More than anyone else alive - if he was alive - Blueblood understood how she had to feeling, and why her eyes lit up when she saw her prize pupil enter the room.

"Is something wrong?"

He blinked, a little thrown to have heard the voice next to him. Of course. He wasn't alone tonight.

"You had a far off look," Rarity observed, appearing worried. "Not that I meant to pry."

"No," he replied, giving off a confident air. "It's nothing. Please, allow me to introduce you to the Princess?"

"I'd be delighted!"

It was just a gesture, really. Celestia knew Rarity from the Nightmare Moon adventure, at least passingly. Rarity herself had already met the Princess, again, at least passingly. Atop the stairs, Twilight and Celestia were already starting to get swamped after exchanging a few words.

"Auntie," Blueblood bowed respectfully. "A pleasure as always to be in your presence. This is Miss Rarity."

"Princess." Rarity's bow was as flawless and proper as one would expect.

"Honestly, you two," Celestia remarked in courteous exasperation. "No need to stand on such formality with me."

"In that case, auntie, may I ask where Princess Luna has gone to?" He looked around. "She should be here... or waiting to come out...?"

"Oh, that." The Princess of the Sun sighed sadly. "I do appreciate you trying to convince her to come, Blueblood. But she told me she's simply not ready to make public appearances yet. Such a shame. Tonight would have been a perfect night to have some fun."

"She declined? Again?" He cringed at that last word slipping out.

"Maybe next year," Celestia mused.

"I see." That one thing never worked out, not unless he stayed the whole day at the Palace. He motioned for them to continue into the Gala proper. "Shall we, Miss Rarity?"

Before they left, however, he felt the need to whisper to the waiting magical prodigy:

"Please bear with the formality, Miss Sparkle." He knew how impatient she was to spent time with the Princess. "There will be ample time after the opening ceremonies."

Leaving the Princess and her student behind, Rarity felt compelled to ask, having heard or guessed at the exchange. "The ceremonies are two hours, aren't they?"

"Yes," he replied, unhappy with that fact. "I wasn't able to change that. Miss Sparkle just have to be patient."

"Well," Rarity maintained, keeping upbeat. "We do have all night, don't we?"

"We do," he answered, with a smirk. "Nothing will ruin this night. Now, would my lady enjoy a tour of the Grand Pavilion?"

The Private Gardens were as wonderful as Fluttershy had imagined. Catching sight of a meadowlark, she skipped happily away from the noise and bustle of the ponies on the open grounds. She wasn't here for them, after all. She was here to experience the exotic, and to encounter the rare and unique animals that made their home among the branches and boughs of Celestia's personal retreat.

Tangled rose bushes around an arch passed overhead as she left the most visible sections of the area behind her. Already, the quiet background murmur of voices was giving way to the chirping and singing of nature's chorus. Trees and bushes, shrubs and ferns, unlike anything she had seen in or around Ponyville surrounded the nature loving pegasus. Feeling uninhibited, Fluttershy opened wide and sang to the bird, having lost it among the maze of foliage, her melodious voice carrying easily in the wind.

Smiling at the sound of a whistle in response, she skipped ahead-

Only to run into a single, stark sign.

[PLEASE do not disturb the animals]

Well - it wasn't as if she was *disturbing* them exactly. Prancing a little deeper and around a well manicured hedge, Fluttershy's wings flared as she came upon another sign. This one was a bit odd.

[Please PLEASE please]

- it pleaded -

[Do Not Disturb The Animals]

There was also a picture of a bear, a monkey, and a bird with a circle and a line through them. Fluttershy was on the verge of saying or doing something unfilly-like, when she caught one last line of writing on the sign:

[for safe wildlife encounters, please see a Royal Game Warden]

The pretty pegasus mare pursed her lips unhappily.

She didn't need a warden. She wasn't going to disturb the animals. On the other hoof, the sign had said 'please' not just once, but four times now. Thinking back, Fluttershy hadn't forgotten the incident with Philomena, either. The animals in Celestia's garden were very rare and precious. It made a certain degree of sense that they wouldn't want just anypony to handle them. Bears could also be quite dangerous if a pony wasn't well versed in bear-fu and/or bear-wrestling.

Not that she, Fluttershy, would have these problems.

Others, though... especially sweet little foals! It wouldn't do for them to just run around the gardens, disturbing birds nesting in the trees and dozing bears and poo-flinging spider monkeys. Those monkeys especially could be quite a hoof-full for the unprepared. Yes. The more Fluttershy thought about it, the more sense it made, especially for a night like the Gala when hundreds of ponies would be hanging around, that the staff would want to minimize the impact the party made on the gardens and wildlife.

She looked around for a 'Royal Game Warden'...

And, coincidentally, found one trimming some bushes! She would have mistaken him for some sort of gardener, what with the beaten up old hat on his head, tool belt, and the fact that he was probably pushing sixty. She would have - if not for the rather elaborate vest that hung around his torso and front legs. It was green and white, and seals on the sides vividly proclaimed: "Royal Chief Game Warden." Fluttershy smiled happily; this had to be just the pony she needed! Soon she'd be on a wildlife adventure, and one that followed the rules, too!

The "Royal Chief Game Warden" whistled to himself while he trimmed the hedge, and Fluttershy realized he was perfectly mimicking the meadowlark she had heard before. Maybe she had even followed the sound and it had been him all along! Why, this was...

Perfect!

"Oh, um... excuse me..." she called to the Game Warden.

He just kept working, whistling all the while.

"I. Um. If it isn't too much trouble..."

He just kept working, switching his shears for a rake.

"Excuse me," she tried again, a bit louder and more assertive. He turned his head, leaning on his rake for support.

"Yep?" he asked, simple as that.

"I was wondering..." she stammered. "You're a royal game warden?"

"The chief of em, or so I've heard," the old pony replied.

"I was just hoping... I mean, since the sign said... I'd like to have some wildlife encounters," she then added, a little more loudly. "Please?"

"Wildlife encounters?" He asked, seemingly confused, and then his eyes opened wide. "Oh! You must be that pegasus filly!"

"Um." Fluttershy ducked low, her pink mane falling over one of her eyes. "I am 'a' pegasus filly, you mean?"

"Sure, sure. Wilderness encounters!" The old coot chuckle, swinging the rake over his shoulder. "Stick close now, how about we start with the bird feeders we set up this mornin'?"

Bird... feeders?

"Oh." She hurried to keep up with the Game Warden. "That'll be... nice."

It didn't take long to find the perfect spot to set up shop.

A quick kick, and the food stall unfolded, the sides popping out and a pair of small flags snapping out to wave in the breeze. Applejack had decided on a busy thoroughfare next to the western Ménagerie, but outside where

there was more traffic. Since so much of that wing was reserved for the Wonderbolts and their little VIP get-together, this spot would allow her to catch the eye of most everypony leaving that section for the other two. It was also open air, so there were no obstructions and plenty of space for customers to mill around and eat.

The only thing dampening the apple farmer's optimistic mood was what she had for sale. The original plan had been to mostly sell plain apples and bottled apple cider, with a little extra in the form of Apple Family style fritters, fries, dumplings and pies. It was a combination that had always hit the spot back in Ponyville, whether during holidays or sports events.

All that had to be put aside, since the buffet was giving much of those treats away for free.

Be Decadent!

That was the plan, anyway.

Not just in spirit, but in writing. She had somehow been talked into actually writing "Be Decadent!" on the front of the cart, superimposed over the original apple and stylized hearts. She still had the cider and hard cider bottles, but her main selling point would be - had to be - the revamped pies and tarts. Opening a sliding tray, she carefully put them on display. Each one was just a slice of pie, slightly tilted on it's side and decorated with frilly apple curls with the skin on, to give it a saw-like appearance. Caramel and chocolate made out the outlines of the Princess's cutie marks all over each plate.

Momentarily distracted, she didn't notice when a stallion in the distinctive blue and gold of the Wonderbolts wandered over.

"Hey, hey, what's that?" he asked, moving in for a closer look. "Apple pie? I love apple pie!"

"Hungry, are ya partner?" Applejack quickly put on her game face, and became all smiles.

"Sure am!" The Wonderbolt exclaimed, salivating at the dishes on display. "Hungry as a horse! How much for a slice of pie?"

"...tenbits..."

"How much was that?" The boisterous pegasus asked, angling his ear towards her.

"Ten," Applejack said a little more clearly. "Ten bits."

"Ten Bits?" The Wonderbolt yelled, and whistled loudly. "Too rich for my blood, even for pie! Looks real pretty, though!"

Applejack watched the pegasus trot off, on the verge of yelling for him to come back. She had...she had...

lost

lost a customer.

She had lost a customer. She'd almost forgotten what that was like. Not only had she lost a customer, it had because her food was overpriced. That had never happened. Not since she was a filly, and she'd gotten the prices wrong by mistake. Applejack reached out a hoof, her pride at war with her better nature. All too soon, the Wonderbolt was out of cajoling range.

She'd lost him. Lost a customer.

"Excuse me, Miss," a jasmine-yellow colored mare snapped Applejack out of her stunned state. She blinked, focused on the intrusion. The mare in front of her had a deep blue mane and an elegant purple and blue dress.

"Yes?" Applejack asked, still in a sort of haze.

"I'd like to try one of your tarts," she said, sounding impatient. "Ten bits, really?"

"Oh. Oh! Yes. Ten bits," Applejack repeated, and handed over one of the platters. They had to be expensive looking, at least, but they didn't need to be super fine. Each one was half a bit itself. Honestly, Applejack wasn't sure what she had been thinking investing so much on such short notice. But then, suddenly, ten bits fell in her wooden money jar.

"Oh, yes, yes!" The socialite used a fork to sample some of the repackaged pie. "Quite delicious," she stated with authority. "Just the right amount of cinnamon! Simply divine."

"Um..." Still a little shell shocked, Applejack was slow to reply. "Thank you. Thank you very much?"

Barely twenty seconds passed, before two ponies took the mare's place, a stallion and his wife... or marefriend. Both were impeccably well dressed; the stallion even had a top hat. Applejack could hardly believe it when he ordered two slices, one for himself and one for his date. Ten bits plus ten bits.

Twenty bits. In twenty seconds. Plus the ten before from the first sale.

"Ah don't believe it," she muttered, and stared as more and more customers began to head her way. She had a limited stock, after all. Blueblood had even told her that that was an advantage, not a problem. 'Less is more,' as he had said. Her food was exclusive. Only a few would get to eat it.

Be Decadent.

It wasn't long before the jingle of gold washed away what was left of her hesitation. Applejack was no Big Mac when it came to fancy numbers, but if she sold out tonight... at ten bloody bits a slice... she would end the night with a profit of almost a thousand bits. It boggled the mind.

"Ah just don't believe it."

"Always hungry after a show, eh Soarin?"

"You know it! I was looking for ya! Let's hit the buffet!"

"Honestly, you're like a giant parasprite or something..."

"It's a metabolism thing. Don't blame me 'cause yer jealous..."

Soarin and Spitfire laughed as they crossed the VIP lounge on their way to the Ménagerie Scorpius and the east wing. The pair just missed a cyan

pegasus in a rainbow colored dress as she approached the two slate-gray security unicorns that checked tickets and IDs. Acting cool as she trailed behind a Wonderbolt with a white and blue tail and mane, the burly unicorn held up a hoof to stop her.

"Hey guys, chill. Check this out!" She held up one wing, revealing her VIP pass. "I'm totally in!"

The guards primly stepped back, bowing their heads in silent apology.

Dash took a few more steps, cool as ice-

Before a fangasm struck, throwing her cool demeanor into the punch bowl. By her own count, almost EVERY Wonderbolt was in this one room. Not just all the active Wonderbolts, either! There were retired greats, too! Some of them were with their families, so she probably wouldn't be able to hang out with them, but most of them were free. They were just chatting with other celebrities or each other.

This. Was. Awesome!

Hardly knowing where to begin, she zipped over to the closest table.

A beautiful, rhythmic canon filled the dance hall of the Ménagerie Ursae.

It was a place of reflection and soft spoken conversation; most of the guests weren't quite ready to dance yet, preferring to nibble on hors d'oeuvres and leisurely fraternize. The acoustics of the Ursae and the two accompanying salons were fantastic, and the quiet melody of the quartet on the stage could be easily heard at the furthest table. High society ponies sipped champagne and discussed the artwork on display, offering critiques and descriptions of their own collections and personal preferences in style and composition.

Pinkie Pie -

Pinkamena Diane Pie, that was, entered with the soft sound of her hooves on the dance floor. She did not bounce. *Oh but she wanted to!* (But she did not). *The shiny dance floor!* (It was quite a nice dance floor). *Oh, and there were so many pretty ponies!* (There were many fine individuals

present). *And the fancy band!* (The Canterlot Chamber Orchestra would be quite fancy, yes).

She reminded herself, literally, that this was not that kind of party.

She knew that, silly filly!

Nonetheless, if she was to claim to be a "premier party pony" then this, too, was a form of party that had to be experienced. Pinkie knew this. *Oh but the shiny dance floor! The pretty party ponies! Shiny! Pretty! Fancy! Dance dance dance dance dance!* (She would dance as soon as the opportunity arose). All she had to do was show a little patience and composure. Remember what the books said. Remember what the nice Prince had said. A lady did not just barge in.

Fixing her long, straight hair, Pinkamena listened to the music. She knew the type of music. She simply had to apply what she had hastily learned. Parties were her specialty, after all. She could do this, even on such short notice. There was no party which she could not master.

Analyzing the musical canon, she picked out the beat. Determined the necessary steps.

She could dance to this.

Dance!

She would dance to this... as soon as the opportunity arose. Jumping in would not be conducive to long term dancing and enjoyment. First - Blueblood had insisted - she needed to mingle. Walking slowly towards a promising pair of stallions, she flashed a small, friendly smile as they noticed her approach. Pinkamena was being a bit bolder than she had been told to be, but it couldn't be helped. Pinkie Pie was naturally impatient.

"The music is quite lovely, isn't it?" she asked.

One of the stallions, a large, ochre gentlecolt with a blonde mane the same color as Applejack's, tittered and adjusted his red cravat neckcloth. He was a unicorn, but with the sort of large build that Pinkamena had noticed most Canterlot unicorns had. It was different from the ones in Ponyville, like

Pokey. Here, for whatever reason, the unicorn stallions were taller and heavier than their earth pony counterparts. It wasn't unattractive, but it was a little intimidating when you were used to the opposite.

His friend was an earth pony with the rather common hourglass cutie mark, and a dark blue coat. His mane was close cut and styled, and a shade of distinctive but not bright orange. He also wore a simple collar and red bowtie. He smiled at her, and she noticed he had golden eyes. Pinkamena decided he would be her first target. She would dance with him. She needed a partner for the Marché.

"Yes, I heard the Canterlot Chamber Orchestra play at the Reinsworth last year," the unicorn replied. "The cellist is new, but quite good."

"Octavia, I believe," the earth pony supplied the name. "But where are my manners?" He gestured to the unicorn first.

"Sun Beam," the noblepony introduced himself.

- and then himself

"Blue Shift," the earth pony said, inclining his head politely.

"Pinkamena Diane Pie." She curtsied.

Inside her, Pinkie was vibrating enough to very nearly explode. (Just hold on a little longer, would you?). She wanted to dance. Even if it was slow, kind of boring dancing. She was here to dance. She wanted to dance and party and maybe sing oh and jump on stage and-

Pinkamena had to fight to remain outwardly calm. Blueblood had stressed that several times. She had to remain calm and ladylike. Just like Rarity. Act like Rarity. But not *exactly* like Rarity. *Mostly* like Rarity.

The music changed to a similar, slow piece. Pinkamena found herself liking this one a bit more than the last. It was a little faster, but it still had a very simple, three step movement to it. She could dance to this. She needed to dance to this. Or Pinkie Pie would do it for her.

"A spell that would allow one to visit Cloudsdale?" Sun Beam took a drink from his glass and licked his lips as he tried to think of the implications.

"Naturally, you'd need to attach it to an... amulet or charm of some sort. It wouldn't do to have to keep recasting it every six or seven hours or what-have-you."

"Ah, but imagine the looks on your friends faces when you tell them: I have a summer home in Cloudsdale," Blue Shift breezily joked. "Of course, you must say it straight faced."

They had been talking about the trip Pinkamena shared about the Young Flyer's Completion.

"Blue," she used just his first name, catching his immediate attention. "Would you care to dance?"

He paused, and smiled, growing agreeable. "That would be quite nice, Miss Pinkamena. Sun Beam, hold my drink would you?"

Finally!

Dancing! Pretty party ponies! Fancy music!

Fun!

(Yes. It was time for fun.)

The two earth ponies stepped out into the dance floor, their intent obvious. A few who had been standing around near the middle of the dance floor noticed and gave room. A few others, mostly high society mares, also took a brief intermission in their gossip to watch. Pinkamena felt their eyes on her, and it only fed the inner dynamo of her excitement. But... the excitement was mixed with just a bit of trepidation. This was a new dance. She had practiced with Prince Blueblood as long as he had free time, and she had read all she could while getting ready, and on the trip over.

Blue Shift bowed, flowingly, and Pinkamena made sure to do the same.

Here we go!

She had to watch him. He was her partner for the dance. The stallion was supposed to take the first step. As she'd expected, he took a step back, and she took a step forward. He stepped to the left, and she to the right. He

stared off with just basic moves, and soon Pinkamena found she didn't have to watch his hooves. She could tell just from the music and from his upper body.

The tempo of the canon picked up, just a little, but Pinkamena knew it was a prelude to things slowing down a little later. Their steps matched, and with a smile, Blue Shift motioned with a hoof and turned on a slant. She quickly did the same, and twirled around, her dress brushing against his legs. She'd picked well! Lucky! Blue Shift was a good dancer!

Pinkamena shared a smile with him as the music slowed, easing down to the end of the piece. Perhaps feeling a little emboldened by her ability to keep pace so well, he used a new move, a 'glissade' to the left. He flowed easily, gliding to the side, and she followed. They matched marches for a few more steps, took a 'glissade' to the right, and ended with a flourish - he reached for her hoof, raised it high, and pulled her into a pirouette.

They came apart, each taking a step back, and bowed.

Pinkie was, for a moment, silent. So was the dance hall. Then, oh so quietly at first, mares and stallions began to clap - gently tapping their hooves on the shiny floor. Opposite her, Blue Shift was breathing a little heavily, but he was all smiles as he stood back up. On stage, the band paused a short while, and then began another quiet piece of classical music.

Inside, Pinkie was cheering, exultant with triumph and accomplishment. She had done it! Despite never having even heard of this sort of dance before today, she had gone out on the dance floor and done it! Better still, she had waited a little while, talked to a nice new colt, and then gone out and shown everypony her stuff! Had she been Rainbow Dash, she'd have been proclaiming how awesome she was. But she was Pinkamena Diane Pie, so she just giggled inwardly, and planned her next move.

She had done it!

She was, without a doubt, a peerless party pony.

Blue Shift retrieved his drink, and he and Sun Beam resumed their conversation. Pinkamena lingered, joining in as necessary. Mingling. That was a party skill, too. This 'Gala mingling' was just so different from the kind

she was used to. The dance-bug was out of her system, at least for a little while, but she wasn't tired yet. Not even close.

The high of accomplishing what she herself had wondered if she could do was also beginning to fade. The answer was... clearly more challenging dances. And more ponies. She could see - feel - that there were other ponies here just waiting for the chance to dance, too. A few mares were discretely watching her back as they spoke amongst themselves. Pinkie was willing to bet that they wanted to dance, too, they just didn't have anyone to dance with. Or maybe they wanted to gossip more first.

She'd had... fun...

It was fun, wasn't it? This was why she had come to the Gala. To party.

Yes. Pinkamena had had fun. She was sure of it.

Pinkie was strangely quiet.

Perfect.

The Gala was going Perfectly!

Blueblood smiled inwardly; not the dignified placeholder grin he wore on the outside, but a big, childish grin. The sort of grin that says: 'I know what's in this present! This is the one thing I've wanted all year! I know it's in there, and it's all mine! Mine! Mine! Bwa-hahaha!'

That sort of smile.

Now he just needed to play the part of the Prince and occasionally teleport away to take care of three or four little Gala disturbances. Luckily, Rarity was quite accommodating. All he had to do was remind her that he had some important errand or another to quickly run, or some Gala function to see to, and she was quite willing to wait a minute or two. It probably didn't matter to her what he was doing, exactly. What mattered was that the Gala as a whole went to plan.

He had, to that end, been a perfect gentlecolt. No tricks. No fun at her expense.

It actually wasn't as terrible he used to find it, when he played along on certain Gala loops.

They had walked about the Pavilion, and made small talk about fashion and art. She had been wowed by the Equestrian Crown Jewels, and gone on at length about the various grades of cuts and weights. Not simply a dress maker, she was accomplished in all manner of setting and arranging and cutting gemstones.

He had tried to throw her off her element a bit by taking her to the Amber Salon - it was off limits to most ponies because, unlike the Crown Jewels, there was no security there and it was very delicate - on the assumption that she would be much less familiar with a 'jewel' that wasn't really a jewel. To his surprise and amusement, she had quickly determined why he had taken her there, and found it amusing as well. The room was visually breathtaking, and she had used a practiced eye to pick out the many, many shades, some bold and some subtle, that gave the Salon it's legendary reputation.

She was less well versed in art. It was a subject Blueblood knew by rote. It was a "proper" thing for a Prince or any high court official to be proficient in. It was thus Princely, and something she no doubt expected of him. As such, he took her on a brief tour of some of the Palace grounds, pointing out the more impressive paintings and murals and tapestries.

His favorite was a gift from Griffin Tribes, made of dragon leather. It took some effort not to show her that 'tapestry.' Celestia had hidden it away in the corner of a trophy room, but hadn't wanted to insult the griffins by getting rid of it entirely. Instead, he had pointed out a more recent addition: a hoof-stitched rug given to them by the Plains Buffalo. It was somewhat crude, compared to so many other fine pieces, but there was an elegance in it's simplicity that he had come to understand over the last year or so of loops.

Finally, they sat under the open sky of the Ménagerie Scorpius.

This was both to rest their legs and to point out the night stars... and to be seen. It was important to be seen together. In fact, that was probably the most important thing. It wasn't long before court mares were whispering jealously amongst each other, and gentlecolts threw the royal pair

appraising, approving looks. Rarity was quiet for this, which he hadn't expected. It was the part he had expected her to enjoy the most.

Then again... no. He wasn't that surprised anymore. Making everypony jealous was something he had thought would make her happy; that it would be the high point of her evening. He had built the night around it.

In retrospect, he should have known better.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, keeping his voice very low. "Don't you want to be seen out here, with me?"

"Oh, it isn't that," she assured him, sitting close enough he could feel the fabric of her shawl (the same one he remembered forcing her to use to clean up a puddle of alcohol) against his shoulder. "The evening has been simply wonderful. You've been a perfect host."

He frowned, but made sure she didn't see it.

It was nothing, then. Nothing was wrong.

The Gala was Perfect.

They sat together in comfortable silence for a minute or two, when the ground of hooves on soft grass grew close. Both unicorns glanced to the left, where an amber earth pony could be seen approaching without hesitation. Who else could it be? The dress was one of a kind. Though it reminded Blueblood of one loop in particular, and a Gala to remember.

"Either 'ah you two mind if I sit down here?" Applejack asked, standing to his left.

"Oh, dear," Rarity sat up a little straighter. "There's no cushion-"

"Don't worry 'bout it, sugarcube," Applejack replied. It took a moment for Blueblood to realize the cowpony was waiting for him to speak up.

"I don't mind," he said. "Miss Rarity?"

"The company would be just lovely."

"Thank ya kindly." Applejack, showing manners he found befitting a court lady, nonetheless plopped down on the raw grass as soon as she had permission. Her hat was barely balanced behind her head, and she glanced longingly up at the stars.

"If I may," Rarity asked, "How did things go with the apple cart?"

"We sold out more than an hour ago," Applejack answered, still gazing upward at the star strewn sky. "All gone. Cept for one bottle a' hard cider I kept fer myself."

"Well, that's wonderful!" her unicorn friend enthused. "Congratulations."

"I made over a thousand bits tonight, Rarity." Applejack pulled her eyes from the heavens and stared across at her friend, and at Blueblood, too. "A thousand bits. I ain't never made a thousand bits in one night before."

Perfect!

The mare had what she wanted! Perfect!

"You don't sound happy about it," Rarity observed, and reached across Blueblood to prod the country mare. "Applejack?"

"Ah guess I'm just a little stunned is all. Plus," she added, forcing a smile on her face. "Ah don't have anythin' to do now."

She looked contemplative, but shook her head, dismissing troublesome thoughts.

"I have'ta thank ya," she said, this time to Blueblood specifically. "You were right. We made out like... like bandits tonight." Applejack stared down at her hooves. "Be Decadent... it worked."

The birds weren't as lively as Fluttershy had imagined.

Or maybe it was just that they were paying more attention to the birdseed in her hoof than to her. First following the Game Warden, whose name she had learned was 'Green Thumb' (whatever a thumb was - funny last name),

and then venturing out a little on her own, she had found the resident animals of the Grand Garden frustratingly...

Well: shy.

Flighty, rather.

Ever since getting her cutie mark, Fluttershy had had a special bond and a way with animals. She had even befriended a Manticore. Or at least she had interacted with one without being eaten. She worked with bears. She worked with bunnies and ferrets and mice and butterflies and bees and essentially every non-pony non-plant form of life she had ever encountered in Ponyville. They called to her heart, and she felt free and unrestrained and loved and appreciated and... and powerful... around them.

Working with animals made her feel alive, like she didn't have a fear or care in the world. Other ponies made her nervous. Even her friends. She felt insecure and hesitant. Animals were different. They embraced her without reservation or duplicity or judgment. She could be herself among them. She didn't need to be 'that shy pegasus.' She could just be Fluttershy.

These animals, though...

She couldn't understand why, but they didn't come to her when she called to them. They fled when she approached them. *They didn't sing back.* That was the worst part. They didn't sing back, and Fluttershy couldn't understand why.

In the end, she had done as the Game Warden asked. She had put birdseed in her hoof, and waited for birds to come to her. They were beautiful birds, too. She'd seen the meadowlark from before, and it had eaten out of her hoof and then perched on the edge of a ceramic birdbath. There was a cardinal with the most vivid red feathers she had ever seen, and not too far away, she could see a rare bald-headed vulture, an animal not native to this part of Equestria at all.

It wasn't just exotic animals, either. Fluttershy had seen many common ones, like squirrels and rabbits and hares. Celestia actually had hares, here! Ones much bigger than Angel Bunny. And prairie dogs and even a Groundhog, somewhere (Green Thumb had said that one was rarely seen).

She was excited to meet these critters, too, even though she had many of them back home. It didn't explain why these ones were so reluctant to get near her, though.

At least she had seen many new friends. Acquaintances. Only a few had come close enough to touch. It was all thanks to the Royal Game Warden, Green Thumb. He was a funny looking old colt, but he had helped. He'd also told her about the rarest of all animals in the Gardens. Legendary creatures, just like Philomena the Phoenix. Fluttershy wasn't sure if she believed in the legendary jackalope, but it made for a good story.

By herself, Fluttershy wasn't sure what she would have done.

Gently patting one of the large hares that she'd lured close with a stick of celery, Fluttershy made sure not to make any sudden movements. She smiled, faintly. This was... what she had wanted, after all. Wasn't it? And she had made a pony friend, too, which was... nice. It was nice.

It was... nice.

"Missy?" Green Thumb crouched nearby, watching her with concern.

Fluttershy wiped her eyes.

"Sorry. It's nothing..." She looked up at the dark night sky. "I think I'd like to see my friends."

Everything was going... swimmingly.

Which was to say: to plan.

Up to and until Blueblood noticed a pair of Wonderbolts by themselves, and not with a specific third that he had arranged. Tensing up - *don't tell me I'll have to loop this again to get it right?* - he also froze in place. It was drastic enough that Rarity and Applejack, who had been chatting to his left and right, also stopped to stare.

"Prince Blueblood?" Rarity inquired.

"Just - Just a moment, please," he excused himself from the two mares and headed over to the table where the two Wonderbolts were relaxing, after ducking the cameras. As usual. It had gotten to the point where, at most any given time, Blueblood knew where the two friends would be. They should have been with Rainbow Dash, too. He *knew* she got along with them. He *knew* she was happy hanging out with them. The whole BLOODY point of this was for her to be happy hanging out with them!

"Oh, hey!" Soarin saw him coming first, and pointed.

Spitfire turned her head, and stared. "Prince B-"

"Soarin. Spitfire. Yes, I know your names." He glared at a hovering shutterbug, chasing the pony off without a word. "Where is Rainbow Dash? Why isn't she with you?"

"Who?" Soarin wondered, scratching his head.

"Rainbow Dash? Oh, her!" Spitfire got it first. She always did. "You mean the kid who won the best young flyer's-"

"Competition and the one who saved you in Cloudsdale," he cut her off. "Exactly. Her. She's also the Element of Loyalty! Where is she?"

Soarin shrugged, not knowing.

"I'm sorry, Prince Blueblood," Spitfire apologized, but didn't back down, even with his temper rising. He'd grown to like that about her. "We haven't seen her. We weren't aware we were *supposed* to see her."

"That's because it was supposed to be a surprise. It was supposed to be spontaneous. You're supposed to run into each other-" He groaned and slammed his hoof into his forehead. "Oh. The pies."

"Pies?" Soarin asked. "You mean apple pies?"

"Yes. Apple. Pies. If she sells them cheap, you meet Rainbow. If they're too expensive, you don't meet Rainbow." He hung his head, shaking it slowly in despair. "I ... hate ... it when this happens. And I can't just force her to meet you, or she'll be rebellious and try and meet with somepony else."

The Wonderbolt pair slowly looked from him, to each other, and then to the distraught Prince.

"Sir?" Spitfire tried. "If you want, we could meet her now?"

"It's too late..." He met her eyes, and resolved himself, standing proud. "No. Maybe it isn't. Follow me."

...

"It looks like your date just became *our* date, sugarcube. Plus two."

"Oh hush! I wonder what's going on?"

...

Rainbow Dash wasn't... unhappy.

She wasn't.

The Night had been pretty awesome. She'd gotten to meet a lot of Wonderbolts. Since she hadn't been sure who she wanted to be her "two" for the night, she'd tried to meet as many of her idols as possible. In the process, she'd met Stormcloud's family (for such a daredevil, Dash had not pictured him having a whole litter of little foals), hung out with an elderly but still amazing Sky Shade, and even shaken hooves with Thunderhead himself.

It was really cool, but... but it didn't feel right asking any two of them to spend the whole night with just her. To hang out with just her. There were fans clamoring for pictures and autographs and old friends - friends of the ponies who were the Wonderbolts under their costume - hoping to catch up with graduates from flight school. It didn't feel right to monopolize any of them. It felt wrong, and the more she thought about it, the more uncertain she was.

She hated being shunted aside. She hated having a pony she wanted to talk to about tricks and lightning and smoke trails be too busy or too distracted by somepony or something else. A part of her wanted to use the power that came with her VIP pass. A bigger part of her knew she'd feel

guilty doing so. It left her between a mountain and a lightning bolt, as the old saying went.

It wasn't that she was unhappy.

Rainbow Dash was just... a little conflicted.

Sitting alone and nursing her thoughts, not to mention nursing her drink, she almost missed the small group of ponies that entered the exclusive invitation-only lounge. Perking up, she left the table and started over to intercept them, her walk becoming a quick trot as Applejack and Rarity moved ahead.

"I haven't seen you guys all night!"

"Boy howdy, I didn't know there were this many ah those Wonderbolt types! You must be in hog heaven!"

"Thank you, Applejack, for that colorful metaphor."

Not the least embarrassed, the three mares embraced, laughing and completely at ease together. It was only a moment in time, but they all seemed rejuvenated by the brief reunion. Soon, Rainbow Dash was being introduced, for the first time, to Rarity's "escort" for the evening, and the stallion who had done so much to help out for the Gala. Strangely, he seemed a little out of sorts. Dash guessed he just hadn't been expecting them all to meet up like they had. He was also more than a little overshadowed by his company.

"Spitfire! Soarin! EEEEE!"

"Yo," the former raised a friendly hoof in greeting.

"Hey," the latter chimed in.

Dash felt Applejack nudge her playfully, throwing a sly wink her way.

Maybe the night was looking up.

Blueblood reappeared in a poof of light and smoke.

"Apologies, Miss Rarity." He turned around, looking for her. "Miss Rarity?"

"Over here." She emerged from around a corner, levitating two cocktails. He relaxed, and carefully took one of the glasses with his own magic.

"Another emergency?" she asked.

"This one couldn't be avoided," he apologized again. "But everything should be on track for another hour and a half."

The two walked slowly towards the ball room and the Ménagerie Ursae.

Rarity was quiet, fiddling a little with her sweet flavored apéritif. She had been since they had left Miss Applejack with Dash and the two Wonderbolts. Blueblood was never happy having to teleport off on her, but some things were simply necessary for the Gala to go along perfectly. This had to be a Perfect Gala. It had to be. He hoped it wasn't testing her patience. Leaving one's date, even for an emergency, was not gentlecoltly.

It would explain why she had become rather quiet.

"Blueblood..." she finally said, as they entered the hall.

Inside, the party was already in full swing, so to speak, all thanks to a carmine pink dance machine at center stage. Whatever Rarity had been about to say ended up on the backburner as she watched her friend Pinkie Pie spiral around an equally energetic blue stallion, her pink and white dress, with candy motif, blurring as she moved from one smooth glissade into a pirouette and into another angled glissade.

The tempo of the paired violin concerto fueled the duo as they moved around the dance floor; not the only dancing couple, but undoubtedly the most flamboyant. Blueblood also seemed impressed, by the soft 'hmf!' he gave after observing his would-be student showing up everypony else at their own game. Sipping from his glass, the apéritif wetting both the palate and the appetite for more than just an exquisite Gala dinner, he held out his hoof.

"Miss Rarity?" he asked, invitingly.

"Oh. As shocking as it to see Pinkie Pie of all ponies dancing out there..." Rarity quickly downed her drink as well, and floated the two glasses over to a nearby table. She took his proffered hoof. "It would not do to miss out on all the fun, would it?"

Cutting across the dance floor, the Prince and fashionista bowed in the customary beginning of the dance. As the violins played, starting the second suite, they began to move, stepping and gliding and flourishing with the music. Both ponies were versed in their steps, and soon began to experiment by mixing in a *petite pas*, then a smooth drifting movement backward, and then including the ever popular *pas de cheval*.

The third suite began with a strong, lively beat and the two unicorns continued, having a comfortable and easy time after learning each other's movements. Hooves slid and trotted across the polished floor, and other bodies moved and spun around them. While not quite inclined to the passionate energy of Pinkie and her partner, Rarity found Blueblood a more aggressive dancer than she had expected, and as accomplished as one would expect from a born and bred member of the nobility. This was the finale of the score, combining the bursts of spontaneity earlier into a sustained, vivacious beat. They circled, turned, circled, and spun as the final suite drew to a close.

The piece ended to the appreciative applause of the growing crowd of dancers.

The violinists bowed and rested, as a dark maned mare stood, balanced against her cello. She cleared her throat, bowed deeply, and resumed her place, at the center of the stage. Nearly dwarfed by her chosen instrument, she reached up to the strings, and began to play. A rich sound filled the *Ménagerie* as she performed, the soulful notes of her cello transitioning from introductory prelude to lively *allemande*.

This, too, was a partnered dance form, but it relied less on movement and more on holding one's partner upright and spinning them, or turning with them, in time. It was a matter of trust, as two ponies dancing *allemande* could stumble and fall together if a major mistake was made.

Rarity lost sight of Pinkie as Blueblood lifted her front legs up, but in the absence of any commotion, assumed that her strangely skilled friend had adapted to this dance as well. Leaning close to her escort, now, she smiled

as he strutted her around, spun her in place, and held her up. The third movement in the cello piece was slower, and she could afford to rest a bit and lean into him.

"You know..." she whispered.

"Yes?" he asked quietly, having heard her.

"This is everything I ever dreamed of." She buried her face into his neck.
"Thank you for this evening."

Her words were kind, flattering even, but there was something in the way she said them-

Blueblood couldn't quite put his hoof on it.

Dinner.

They had made it to dinner!

No animals. No rampage. No damned flying cake! No collapsing statues!

Just... dinner.

The six mares that made up the Elements of Harmony soon collected together, sitting next to one another and talking animatedly. The evening was going splendidly. While not as acoustically pleasing as the Ursae, the actual tables were stretched across the equally large Ménagerie Scorpius. Closed briefly so the servants could hustle in and remove the buffet and set up the tables and silver wear, it was also well suited because it kept all the smells of food to just one hall instead of three.

Celestia herself sat at the head of the table, the very apex of the proverbial pyramid, and all ponies radiated from her like the dwindling rays of the setting sun. High ministers and office holders were seated the closest to their sovereign; Blueblood himself sat to her left, and an empty chair remained unused to her right, reserved for the other Princess of the Realm (in absentia). That open space had not been in the plans until this morning when he had thought to add it, breaking the traditional seating

arrangement. Barring his own time loops, Blueblood was confident that Princess Luna would be occupying it next year.

If that year ever came.

The Elements of Harmony, all six of them, were to his left in turn: a prominent place within the unspoken pecking order of Canterlot high society. Stealing more than a few looks their way, he felt confident that they were all enjoying themselves. The timid pegasus had been a bit down after her return, but it was far better than her demanding love from idiotic, obstinate animals and causing a stampede of panicked aristocrats. Back in the company of her friends, she had cheered up and now positively glowed. Miss Pinkamena's hair was also starting to curl.

"Nephew," Celestia spoke quietly; her voice as regal as ever, but her words intended only for him.

"Auntie?" he asked, also keeping his voice down. One eye took a quick look at the time.

"I must commend you," she said, dabbing her mouth with a silk napkin. "You've put quite a lot of work into keep tonight's Gala on schedule."

"The Gala," he cordially reminded her, "...is a celebration of the founding of Canterlot, and of *you*, auntie. You are the light of Equestria without which there would be only darkness. Why shouldn't it be perfect?"

She smiled, knowingly, like he was just a foal. "Nephew, please."

"Auntie," he said, then. "Did you want tonight's Gala to be something other than it is?"

Her serene expression never wavered.

"You've become a bit more clever recently," she noted. "And much better at teleportation."

"I've had a lot of time," he countered. "Auntie..."

"Your Gala is perfect, Blueblood. You've done a remarkable job. I mean that, I really do." She looked out over the guests, and the quiet background

music, and the orderly attendants, and the finery on display. One mauve eye crinkled a little, and for a heartbeat, she looked old and... sad.

"Auntie," he asked, a hint of desperation in his voice. "Should I not have done this?"

She kept her eyes on the Gala, as if deciding the answer for herself.

"The fun in life is not knowing what's going to happen," he said, then. "The wisest of ponies relish a little nonsense now and then. You told me that."

Her one visible eye traced over to him. "I never told you that, nephew."

He bowed his head, quickly, respectfully.

"Maybe it was foalish of me, anyway," she whispered. "I..."

"Pardon," Blueblood interrupted her, reluctantly.

And teleported.

A second before he did, a pony stood up at the far end of one of the tables, distant enough that his face could hardly be seen with any detail. The stallion clutched at his throat, coughing and choking. His chair fell to the floor, and he stumbled back - into a waiting body. Front legs reached up and around, locking in place and then thrusting back. With one smooth movement, whatever was in the guest's throat flew across the table to land in a bowl of fruits.

The danger passed, Blueblood held the older stallion back into his seat, and teleported back to his own chair. There was some scattered applause, as various ponies realized what had happened, but for the most part there was only stunned silence. Not looking terribly pleased with himself, the Prince at Celestia's side stood, asked for the music to resume, and took his seat again.

"Nephew..." Celestia began anew. "We should have a talk. In private."

"Miss Sparkle will..."

"Twilight and her friends will be staying the night here in the castle," Celestia informed him. "She will understand if I wish to have a few words with you, of all ponies."

He bowed; there was no point arguing.

"As you wish, auntie."

There was no hiding things from Celestia. There was definitely no hiding things from her when she already had an inkling that something was wrong. One could try. With his foreknowledge, he knew he could *try*. But this was auntie - he couldn't. She asked, and he answered, and told her everything.

Justifiably, even for an immortal goddess, it took a few seconds to settle in.

"How many... times has this happened?" she gently asked. The two were alone on a balcony in the Royal Apartments, overlooking the golden crowns of Canterlot's towers below. A cool night air sent a ripple through Celestia's ethereal mane, the coruscating aurora of colors shifting in place.

"I'm not even sure anymore," he answered, looking out over the Palace. "I lost count a long time ago. Hundreds. Maybe a thousand or more?"

He heard her wings unfurl, and one settled softly on his back.

"My poor boy."

He tore his eyes from Canterlot and saw that she was looking at him with worry. "You believe me then? Or do you think-" he tapped his head. "The problem is in here, and not in here." He tapped his chest.

"I believe you. For what's left of tonight, I'll believe you." She reached out and lowered his hoof. "You're not the stallion you were yesterday."

"I wonder if you'd say that, knowing some of the things I did when I learned about this condition. I did..." He frowned in remembrance and hung his head in shame. "I did desperate, terrible things. And I did things to spite you, auntie."

"In your position... I probably would have done the same, eventually," she remarked with a casual chuckle; so reversed was she, there were many who would doubt that fact, even in light of her saying it herself. "Blueblood, I am as much a pony as anypony else. We all have our flaws and vices, our conflict between what we want to do and what we must do. In the past, you've been..."

"A disappointment," he said. "I know," he admitted, looking away. "I've seen... learned... about how many mistakes I made. I know how little I used to even care."

Celestia shifted a little next to him.

"I wish I could help you. But there is no magic I know of that can deal with a problem like this."

"I know," he replied, wanly at first but then with genuine amusement. "Believe me, I know. I've asked you so many times. Searched everywhere. Nothing."

"Is that why you did what you did tonight with the Gala?" the Princess asked.

"Partly." He nodded, confirming her suspicion. "A part of me thought: maybe if the Gala goes perfectly, then the loop will end? There has to be a reason why this is happening to me, on this night of all nights. And partly, it was just out of curiosity. Could I even do it?" Blueblood chuckled again, easily. "I think I've gotten to the point where I'm doing things just for the challenge of doing them."

The cloudless sky - cleared for the Gala, perfectly! - stretched overhead as the royals sat in silence.

"You may have spoiled my fun tonight. A little." Celestia admitted, and ruffled his mane, causing the grown stallion to roll his eyes and grumble. "But I was proud of you, tonight, too. My little pony."

The night was over.

The Perfect Gala night.

Blueblood held his head high as he walked to his quarters. All that was left now was to sleep, and wait, and see. Things had gone well, in the end. Perhaps not entirely perfectly, due to a few inevitable oversights, but *nearly* perfectly. He rather doubted he could repeat the day to such effect. Of course, he probably would, eventually, keep at it and at it and at it.

Having just unbound his bowtie, he came up short as he noticed somepony besides his two usual retainers waiting for him by his suite door. It was her. What was she doing here?

"Miss Rarity," he said, bringing the smile back to his face. "Hello."

"Prince Blueblood," she replied, ducking her head in courtesy. "I wanted to thank you again for the wonderful night. For myself and for my friends."

Ah.

"No need," he assured her, dismissing the niceties with a wave of his hoof. "It was my pleasure."

"I also..." She flushed demurely, her royal blue eyes darting away. "Wanted to talk to you. In private."

"As you wish," he deferred, motioning for her to walk alongside. "My study is this way."

She still wore her Gala dress, he noticed, but without some of the accoutrements. Specifically, most of her jewelry had been left somewhere - probably her room - and its absence drew attention to her features. Not the first time, he thought that she was an attractive mare. Her eyes were a stunning blue, stormy dark when she got angry and bright and light when she laughed; her voice was quite pleasing, provided she wasn't screeching or using it as a weapon of mass destruction. Her coat wasn't quite white, but a very soft and feminine shade of light gray. Good breeding; good poise; even a good dancer.

She really was regal; a true lady.

A bit of magic unlocked his private study, and a flash of light activated the electronic lights. Candles, even magical wickers and lamps, were off limits

here, just as in the library. A fire could easily destroy irreplaceable documents and records. Sadly, this gave the room a harsher form of illumination than it needed. Some pony really should find a way to dim these electronic light devices. Perhaps he could spend the next thirty or forty loops studying electronic engineering? Not like it would hurt for the effort.

"So this is... your office?" Rarity asked, looking around.

"My apologies for the mess, Miss Rarity. And for the lights."

His horn glowed, and he turned off some of the bulbs, reducing the brightness by lengthening the shadows. It was uneven lighting now, as some places flared while others darkened, but the overall effect was close to desired.

It was, he had to admit, a bit of a clutter. Never the most organized or efficient or diligent pony, every morning he found his study in the same state of disarray, like a constant reminder of how neglectful and wasteful he had been 'yesterday.' He tidied up much of it by rote each day, now, as he saw to the Office of the Veneur's internal audit. It helped to know where everything was, so a few twists of magic did the rest.

"Is it very much work?" she inquired, opening a nearby window to let air in. Her hoof brushed against a faint magical field that functioned as a screen outside the window, both to prevent things like insects from getting inside, and to ensure that other *things*, like thieves, couldn't make off with precious documents.

Luna's moon, full and bright, could be seen outside, providing a light of its own.

"If you had asked me that yesterday, Miss Rarity, I would have said no: it isn't much work at all." He smiled, running a hoof along one of the hanging maps. "But more recently, I've started to remember why I accepted this job, and the extra work has found more meaning."

"How so?" she asked, trotting over to see what he had: it was a map of Everfree.

"It was easy to forget that this office affects the lives of others. Lines on a map, you see?" He pointed to a straight border, and a neat, right angle. "I never went out to actually see these places, but there are ponies down there. Like your friend Applejack. She lives here."

He pointed to a large, sprawling delineation of land.

"Is this to scale? I never imagined that Sweet Apple Acres was so large. And this is Ponyville here?" She pointed to a few neat intersections on the map. There were no buildings shown. Just ordinance zones, marked with tiny letters. He also noticed that she had taken off those crystal slippers. How any mare could walk in such things, he couldn't imagine.

Of course, the map was dominated by Everfree Forest.

"Oh, and here's the mountain with that dragon Fluttershy chased off!" Rarity pointed out another area, with high peaks stylized in two dimensions. "This little rectangle here must be the ruined castle? Is Zecora's hut on here anywhere?"

"The zebra of Everfree?" he asked, having heard the name before. He had even tracked her down once, hoping her 'zebra voodoo' had some cure for his condition. "Not yet. I should probably add it sometime, but I believe... here?" He took a quill and marked a spot in the forest with a small 'x'.

They tittered a little, and he showed her a few other maps, this time of exotic places. Ponies only lived and settled in a relatively small percentage of Equestria. Most of it was empty or considered uninhabitable. Sections had to be cleared and prepared for settlement: the wildlife tamed or domesticated or otherwise made harmless. Diseases had to be magically eradicated and weather had to be bridled by teams of trained pegasi.

Blueblood found himself enjoying having a guest here, in a place he considered more private than even his bedchamber. Royal ponies had charted far off lands, and copies of almost every place known to ponykind existed here or in the formal office headquarters. Most of it had been collecting dust for years.

"What about this?" Rarity gestured to a newer, rougher map.

"That is actually a maze," he explained. "The laurel maze outside in the gardens."

It was magnificent, really. Octagonal, it was without peer in all of Equestria, and the centerpiece of the larger Grand Garden complex. Blueblood highlighted some of the more interesting features: the statuary at the south entrance, for example, featuring a number of unknown, ancient works in one area, and newer facades to the east and west. There were areas within the maze as well, for tents and smaller pavilions. These were arranged in symbolic geometric shapes and along cardinal points.

"You'll forgive me, but it sounds as if your true calling is in maze making," Rarity observed, having endured his long winded exposition.

"That isn't inaccurate." He gazed fondly at the map. "I have my cutie mark because of the laurel maze outside. It is... special to me."

"Would you mind if I asked about it?" Polite and ladylike as always.

"There isn't much to tell. Actually, you're the second filly today to ask about my cutie mark." He traced a line along the south end of the maze. "When I was young, I snuck away from my lessons to play in the gardens here. I was foalish and loved to poke my nose where it didn't belong. You probably know how little colts and fillies can be."

Rarity shook her head in dismay. "You could say that."

"Well, I wandered into the maze, thinking there was candy or some other silly thing in the middle. Something Auntie Celestia and the other adults wanted to hide or keep for themselves. Why else would someone make a big maze? I wandered around with a pen and paper and tried to find the center. When I noticed ponies looking for me, I hid, because I didn't want to get in trouble."

"Of course," he added. "I got in trouble."

"Of course." Rarity seemed to be enjoying the story. He continued:

"Eventually, I found the center of the maze. Mostly through blind luck." He pointed with the back of his feathered quill to a small space in the absolute center of the hexagon, sandwiched between three larger open pavilions.

"But there wasn't any candy or any prize. I didn't turn into an alicorn or find a pile of bits."

"But..." He smirked. "I did get my cutie mark."

"Well?" Rarity asked, expecting one more bit of information. "You must tell me, Blueblood. What was at the center of the maze?"

"Ah. The center of the maze." He hesitated, unable to resist jerking her around a little. Tapping his chin, he wondered aloud, "What was at the center of the maze again? I forget."

"Tease!" She tapped his front leg, and blushed hotly at the familiar, forward contact.

"Miss Rarity." It was his turn to ask something now: "What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

She looked away, shyly. "The Gala."

Always the Gala.

"Was something wrong with it?" he asked. At least he could do better next time.

"I had a wonderful evening. All my friends had a wonderful evening," Rarity told him, looking up into his eyes. "But I don't think you did."

"Me?" He blinked a few times, not having expected that at all. "I... didn't?"

"You seemed to know what each of us wanted to get out of the Gala," Rarity continued. "You knew that Applejack wanted to make money by selling food here. You knew that Twilight wanted to spend the evening talking with the Princess. You knew that Rainbow wanted to meet with the Wonderbolts; you even knew she'd become friends with Spitfire and Soarin. Heavens, she couldn't stop talking about them!"

He backed away a step, feeling like her analysis of the evening was an accusation.

"You knew that Pinkie wanted to dance and party; she told us all about how you gave her those books and how you showed her how to Marché and slow dance." Rarity didn't sound angry, but she took a step forward as he had taken a step back. "You even knew about Fluttershy. The Game Warden she met... you told him to be there, didn't you? He was expecting her."

His flank bumped into a desk; there was no where left to back up to.

"And of course you knew about me," she hammered home, sounding more confused than upset. "I don't know how, but you knew about me. I won't ask what you had to do to learn all those things. I know what you've been doing when you teleported away to 'take care of official functions.' I asked around. Keeping a statue from falling? Saving somepony from choking? Even stopping a servant from dropping a tray of drinks?"

She pressed a hoof to his chest.

"Blueblood. I don't know if you used some sort of magic to do it. And I'm not angry." He relaxed a bit, and the fashionista lowered her hoof to the floor. "The only pony you didn't seem to bother with was yourself. What did you want out of tonight's Gala?"

"I know..." she concluded, a little sadly. "I know it isn't romance. I know it isn't me."

Yesterday, he would've snorted at her admission. At her broken heart. Today, he felt terrible; he felt like he'd failed. Not just in making the perfect Gala. But as him.

"Miss Rarity..." He took her hoof and touched his forehead to hers. "I am sorry. You are a perfect lady. But... I am not a perfect Prince."

"Next year," she asked, and he felt her breath on his chest as she leaned into him. "Next Gala, I'd like it if we could do what you want. What makes you happy."

"You don't mean that..." he tried to protest.

"I do," she said, firmly, meeting his eyes. "I'll never forget tonight."

He knew what she would say next.

"...I wish it could last forever."

Of course... it didn't.

Chapter 5

*"You'll be seeing Rain Booms!
Ooo-ooo-oooh!
Equestrian Girls, we're kinda magical!
Boots on hooves, bikinis on top!"*

Blueblood opened his eyes.

He remembered falling asleep in his study, Rarity curled up next to him. He remembered: he had tried to stay up. *He had*. To the sound of her soft snoring, he had studied her features and talked aloud about mazes and maps and noble gossip and juicy court rumors, long after she had tired of telling him about her friends, Ponyville, her sister and her work. They discussed the merits of archery versus falconry, and she recounted the adventure she had trekking through Everfree and meeting a sea serpent named Steven, winning him over as the cost of an unseasonably short-cut tail. The last thing he recalled was resting his head and his eyes, knowing she was already fast asleep.

And now she was gone.

Resting his front leg against his face, Prince Blueblood sucked in a shuddering breath. It had been hundreds of loops since he had cried. Muffled sounds escaped his lips. Part of him wanted to stay in bed: to just lay in place and relive a shadow of that fleeting moment of happiness he had captured... that he had *shared*...

Gone.

There was an ache in him that hadn't been there before. He had stabbed himself, poisoned himself, electrocuted himself; he had been drowned, burned, hung, petrified and even devoured; he had died in countless ways but the pain had never lasted. Every morning he was back where he began. Every morning he was as good as new. This was the first time he *hurt*.

Light filtered in through a crack in the curtains, reminding him that, as attractive as it was to do nothing, he had made a promise to himself: every day, an opportunity. No more suicidal loops. No more wallowing in grief. Do better. *Be better*. It was the only way forward when fate brought you back to start, time and time again.

Inhaling, fortifying his resolve, Blueblood forced himself out of bed and opened the curtains to take in the Gardens below. It was another day; another beautiful morning. Taking a few seconds longer than usual to stare at the maze in the distance, he rang the bell for his chambermaids. He'd tried to be upbeat, and he told himself again and again he still would be, no matter what happened.

His heart wasn't as compliant as his brain. It felt stressed, stretched, and worn.

"Good morning Light Touch. Sandy," he greeted the pair, and turned his head to stare at his reflection. It was the same as always.

"My Prince?" Light Touch asked, carefully, sensing something was amiss.

He smirked, haltingly.

"Tonight's the Gala, isn't it, Sandy?" he asked, smiling pleasantly at the shy servant filly.

"yes... sir..." she muttered.

He levitated a brush out of her hooves. "I'm going for a little walk."

...

Discord.

He stood before the supposedly inert statue. It was not unfamiliar to him. He had seen it in passing many times. His being able to sense a faint hint of the demon within was new. It wasn't necessarily malice, as the old books claimed: it was like probing ripples of magic, barely discernable against the natural flow of the arcane all around them. Perhaps he had been completely inert once, but those old bonds were clearly fading... fraying... and close to failing.

"You're clearly distraught, but no magic on Equestria could have the effect you describe. Even Discord himself couldn't cast such a spell. ... Probably."

He had not forgotten Celestia's words, said in passing, so long ago.

"If I released you..." He wondered aloud, believing that just maybe it could hear him. "Could you save me?"

He reached for the cold stone, his hoof rushing against a scaled leg.

"Could you kill me?" he asked, more quietly.

Discord. The only known being more powerful than Celestia. More powerful than Luna. As powerful, it was rumored, as the Elements of Harmony themselves. This was Discord.

He could do it, too.

Blueblood knew he could.

"Even Discord himself couldn't cast such a spell. ... Probably."

Probably.

And if Discord was free; if the rules of the universe were cast aside, then what? Was this the answer? Was this how he could end the cycle? Blueblood wondered about that. He had already destroyed Canterlot once, an act he wasn't proud of. At the time, he had been willing to do that, to take that step, to go that far, to sacrifice *that much*... to be free. Now, standing in front of what could be his only potential path to freedom, Blueblood couldn't help but think of all the ponies across Canterlot that he had helped and saved trying to manufacture a 'Perfect Day.'

It was just the two of them, alone, in that garden. No pony could stop him in time. No pony could blame him. It was tempting. So terribly, silently, agonizingly tempting.

"I could," he said, but turned away. "But it seems I can't."

He gave the stone prison a passing pat on the foot, and walked back to the castle. There was still much so much see, so much to learn, and so very much to do.

"I think... tonight... is going to be alright..."

The stagecoach pulled up and Spike made a pair of quick jumps down to the ground. Canterlot had been done up in style; this was his first time seeing the Grand Galloping Gala up close and he had to admit it was an impressive sight! Canterlot was his hometown and old stomping grounds. There was so much to do and see, not just at the Gala, but in the Palace and all around town! Better yet, there was no curfew! They had all night to enjoy themselves!

Bowing as he waited for the door to the carriage to open, he was rewarded with a real sight: the six mares inside were positively glowing with anticipation and excitement, looking outright amazing in their dresses. Rarity sure knew her stuff, that was for sure! What other pony could have designed and stitched six unique, personalized dresses - actually twelve if you counted the rejects, or was it eleven, since the girls had finished one of them? Regardless, Spike doubted any other pony in Equestria could have Rarity's feat. The result was a stunning sextet of mares, ready to hit the town.

He stood aside and listened as they began a musical number.

The little dragon had sort of expected something like this to happen. If the group hadn't gotten started on it, Pinkie Pie herself would have at least *tried* to burst into yet another random ballad about Galas and parties. The spontaneous song and dance thing was a relatively recent development for the young dragon, probably something to chalk up to some sort of weird friendship-based magic or another, so Spike simply took it in stride and tapped his foot as it played out.

'Art of the Dress,' he decided, *'Was better.'*

Then again, what could top Art of the Dress?

The song, meanwhile, reached it's end and...

And then everypony bolted, going their separate ways the moment they passed through the castle gates. Alone on the red carpet, Spike could do little more than stare at the retreating hindquarters of his friends from Ponyville. Twilight - running off to see Celestia. Of course. Rainbow Dash - off to gush over the Wonderbolts. Big surprise. Pinkie Pie - off to tear up the dance floor somewhere. Made sense. Applejack - off to set up shop. Sooner was better than later, he supposed. Fluttershy - beeline right for the gardens. Did she even have a map, or was she just going to get lost out there?

Then there was Rarity - off to find love. Like she couldn't find that down the street. Spike sighed. That was a depressing topic, being treated like a little egg-toothed baby by the mare you loved. Seriously: he'd lost his egg tooth years ago! Anyway: would it have really been so hard for everypony to stick together, at least for a while? Hopefully they'd all get the various Gala distractions out of their systems soon.

Until then, well, he could wait around the gate... so they could find him when the time came.

It was in the midst of doing so, when a rumble in the little dragon's stomach prompted him to cover his mouth. It felt like a letter from Celestia, but now, of all times? Turning his head, he coughed, and the ash from his sputtering green flame came together, congealing into a curled paper note. Reflexively opening it while looking for Twilight (it had to be for her) he caught the line on the top.

"Wait a second," he said to himself, re-reading it. "It's for... me?"

Twilight ran up the steps of the Oratory, slowing as she noticed not one Royal personage, or even two, but three waiting for her. Waiting for and greeting all the guests. Celestia was actually off to the side slightly, rather than the center of attention, as a dark alicorn gestured and inclined her head politely to the sets of incoming guestponies.

"Princess Luna?" She couldn't help but wonder, stopping a few steps short of the forked platform that crowned the Oratory staircase.

"Twilight Sparkle!" The Princess of the Night announced, loudly. "We welcome you to this year's Gala celebration! There will be much feasting and boasting and drinking this night!" She cringed a little, lowering her voice. "Though, actually, we have been told the feasting and drinking has been refined somewhat over the last thousand years."

"Still a great deal of boasting, however," Celestia chimed in, walking closer and motioning her student closer. "Come, Twilight. We are both glad to see you."

"Yes! We would thank you for your actions freeing us from Nightmare Moon," Luna declared. The Lunar Maiden held out her gilded, silver hoof.

"Happy... to have helped?" Twilight shook the dark alicorn's hoof, surprised that she was more gentle with her grip than she was in toning down her speaking voice.

"Miss Sparkle," another voice spoke, and a large white unicorn trotted up, also offering his hoof. This had to be the one mortal member of the royal family, Prince Blueblood. This was also the stallion that Rarity had mentioned wanting to meet. There was a rumor around *Ponyville* of all places that he had been seen there. Twilight shook his hand and he smiled pleasantly.

"Princess." Twilight quickly turned her attention to her mentor. "I was hoping we could talk tonight. I have so much to tell you!"

Celestia's violet eye narrowed as she tried to explain: "I'm quite busy at the moment, but later I'm sure we..."

"It occurs to me, auntie," Blueblood interrupted, giving a short 'hmm.' "That the rules specify the Princess should be present to welcome guests for the Gala. Not... necessarily... which... Princess."

The immortal alicorn's smile widened, just enough for those who knew her to recognize it.

"Quite a liberal interpretation of the rules, nephew." She leaned down, and whispered among the four of them. "I like it. I'll be back to check on you two sooner or later."

Twilight grinned, ear to ear, and trotted after her mentor and idol.

'How lucky!'

Luna watched the pair go with a quizzical eyebrow. She then turned to her estranged nephew.

"One would almost think you planned that ahead of time," she stated, a smile on her face.

"One would," Blueblood agreed, and waved to another of the arriving guests: a pair ascending the steps, no doubt to distract her. Luna chuckled, and prepared to meet the next group of ponies, her nephew by her side. Regardless of whether he had any other motive behind talking her into attending, the fact was that she was here, now, and determined to see the night through.

Even a thousand years ago, Luna knew she had never been a very popular or gregarious Princess. So much had changed over the centuries of exile, that she was even more hesitant than before to try and repair her image and make a public appearance. When Blueblood had personally asked her to attend the night's celebrations, she had initially tried to dismiss him. The Gala was the social event of the year, after all, and it was wiser to start small and work one's way up.

Her estranged nephew, however, had a surprising way with words. He also seemed to know every single mare and stallion in Canterlot, and was willing to make introductions for her without making her seem like an accessory. She wondered if his current scheme, whatever it was, was also what had called him away from the Palace so abruptly and repeatedly throughout the day?

"Lady Flare," he identified the mare first, then her date. "Hoity. How nice of you two to make it!"

"Indeed!" Luna thundered, greeting them in her own way, Canterlot speaking voice on full roar. "We are Princess Luna, and in the name of the Royal Family, we welcome you to our Gala!"

Rarity couldn't help but notice that she had been on the receiving end of a strange look from the Prince when she introduced herself to him - and to Princess Luna. Not only did he know who she was, a fact that had filled her with glee at the time, but he had kissed her hoof. An action she had not seen him repeat with any number of other esteemed and important guests of court mares. She was still a bit flushed and flattered, but there was a degree of curiosity coloring her thoughts as well. He must have heard of her somewhere.

Yet there was little time for pleasantries.

"Miss Rarity," he had said with a sly grin. "I may impose on you for a dance later."

She had been about to remark on how she'd be honored to do so, when she'd been shuffled off, the Prince offering a conciliatory wink. A long line of guests were gathering to introduce themselves to their new, returned, Princess Sovereign and there was no time to linger. Luna was a new item, and even with Celestia not present, and novelty attracted high society. The poor Princess was greeting guests in groups of four or more. Remaining close by - not necessarily to *eavesdrop*, but just to see - Rarity happened to overhear how the Prince was listing off every guest, by rote and by name and title.

Well, him knowing her now seemed less surprising.

On the other hoof, it was rather impressive. Some faces were known to all who fashioned themselves cultured. It was hard to mistake Hoity Toity, for example, but Rarity had not known the mare with him. She recognized Star Streak, the famous model, but not the other two mares following her around. More importantly, with the rate introductions were being made, the two Royals would be done in less than an hour. This was a good thing: it meant she didn't have to wait long to catch the Prince's eye a second time.

In the interim, Rarity busied herself by mixing and mingling with some of the other socialites upstairs. Checking a large, antique clock on display between two of the Ménagerie wings, she also wondered how her friends were getting along. She had tried to impress on them the importance of blending in tonight and that they were attending the *crème* of high society functions. It was a big "if" as to whether they had paid much attention.

"My pie! You saved it!"

Soarin wasted no time in dealing with his precious confection. Not wanting to risk another accident, he placed it on the floor and started to dig in. No one could wreck it if it was in his stomach!

"Hey, I know you!" Spitfire pointed to the filly in the rainbow dress: the savior of Soarin's pie. It seemed like they wouldn't be hitting the buffet yet after all. "You're the pony that saved us in Cloudsdale and won the best flyer's competition!"

"Hay, yeah!" The light blue pegasus boasted, basking in the glow of recognition. "Name's Rainbow Dash!"

"Well, Rainbow Dash, it looks like your skills saved us again." Spitfire smirked and glanced over to the side, where her partner was already half finished stuffing his face. "Or, well, at least they saved Soarin's apple pie."

The stallion's response was affirmative, though muffled by chunks of baked pastry.

"Wanna come hang out with us?" she then asked, motioning over to the VIP lounge.

"Sure," Dash played it (terribly obviously) coy. "Why not?"

"Funny story," Spitfire added, leading her through security. "There was some kind of weird scheduling mistake, so Soarin and I are free all night."

Applejack was not a happy pony.

Aside from one apple pie, she hadn't made a sale in almost an hour. The culprit had to be the hay-seed buffet down the way. There were flowery signs up helping to direct ponies - "guests only" - to where they could fill up on fancy itty-bitty *hors d'oeuvres*. Worse, there wasn't a darned thing she could do about it.

"Pardon me."

Applejack looked up, the cup of her hoof making a 'pop' as she pulled it free of her cheek. How long had she been moping there? Long enough to leave an embarrassing imprint on her face, probably. She got a good look at the speaker, and realized after a second that it was a potential customer! Not one of the guests, though.

This pony wore clean but simple clothes in white and black with a bit of pink. She was a unicorn, with a light blue coat (lighter than Dash's) and a pinkish-red mane, done back into a neat bun. With her was another mare, the same age or maybe a little younger, with a chocolate coat and dark blonde mane. They didn't seem to be guests at all. In fact, if Applejack had to guess, they were... servants?

"I was wondering if I could have one of your apples?" the more talkative of the pair asked, pointing to one apple in particular.

"Sure thing, sugar cube!" Applejack cheered inwardly at finally getting another sale. She faced the other mare. "Hungry? Anything I can get for ya?"

"Could I have a... candy apple?" The dark brown filly asked. Her bashfulness could probably give Fluttershy a run for her money.

"One candy apple, comin' right up!" Plucking the confection off its tray, Applejack added a little napkin so it was easier to hold onto and eat. "Enjoy!"

With a jingle, four bits fell into her purse.

The two serving girls didn't waste time before starting to eat. By the looks on their faces, they were happy, satisfied customers - Applejack's favorite. She only had six bits to her name tonight, but it was better than nothing, and seeing ponies enjoying the fruits and labors of Sweet Apple Acres was a reward in and of itself, too. Just not a monetary reward. The family needed those, too.

"Excuse me, Miss," a stallion's voice this time.

She looked up, and saw a colt in a prim, white and black vest. There were two others with him.

More servants?

"We heard you were sellin' applies," the leader of the trio continued.

Applejack's spirits rose. "Yer darn tootin' I am!"

Maybe tonight wouldn't be such a wash after all?

Things weren't working out.

It was time to be more... assertive. Yes. Assertive!

"I'm so-oo sorry to have scared you, my friends!" Fluttershy called to all the little critters in hiding, the line of rope between her teeth. "But... I'm leaving now... so you can all Come Out!"

Ducking quickly behind one of the many festive iron arches, she peeked out from around the corner to watch the fruits of her labor. Very soon, she'd finally have one of the garden's elusive little critters, and it would learn to love her just like all the animals back home did. She'd then set it free to tell all the other animals, and like a runaway chain reaction, all the animals would come to her to apologize for being so flighty and rude. They'd see that she was just like them, and that she was their friend, and they'd spend all night singing and frolicking and teaching her about their quirks and natures.

All she had to do to get to that point... was catch... one... little... critter...!

A strangely sinister laughter bubbled up from her throat in a voice she hardly recognized as her own. Part of her Gala dress snagged on nearby rose bush that wound around the hedge, the thorn ripping free one of her little blue butterfly ornaments. Fluttershy ignored it. Little things like that could be patched up later. All she had to focus on now was waiting for the 'crunch-crunch' sound of some adorable animal, nibbling on the bait!

Pop!

Odd. Animals didn't go "pop." Balloons went "pop" but not animals.

She opened her eyes, and saw a large pair of hooves in front of her. It was connected to a pony, a unicorn pony - oh dear, unicorns went 'pop' didn't they - and he didn't seem happy. It wasn't even that strange but harmless groundskeeper who kept getting in the way of her catching... making... an animal friend tonight. This was a large, pure white, important looking pony.

Fluttershy also realized, then, that she had a rope in her mouth. A rope that led around the corner to a trap. A trap meant for an animal. An animal that was living in Celestia's private garden. Oh dear.

"Miss," the unicorn began to say. "May I ask what you're doing out here?"

"Oh. Um. I." She shrank down, her pink mane covering her face. "I was being assertive?"

He held out a hoof, not angrily, but expecting to help her up.

Fluttershy dropped the rope, took his offer, and stood. Standing up, she could see that he was just as big, and still as intimidating, especially since he had caught her being quite... improper. A voice in her head whispered: not improper, illegal! But that was just an overreaction, surely. She wasn't really in trouble, was she? She wouldn't be banished for just setting one harmless little trap, would she? She wouldn't be thrown in the dungeon! That was for serious criminals, not poor, beleaguered animal lovers!

"You must be Miss Fluttershy," the unicorn said, and she nodded meekly.

"Um. Yes. You... know me?" Probably because of her time as a model. She cringed at how famous that had made her, especially in certain circles.

"I've seen your picture," the stallion replied. "Let's go put away that... trap of yours. I don't think it would work too well anyway."

"What was wrong with my trap?" She asked, feeling a bit defensive... and apparently self-incriminating. "I mean. If you don't mind me asking? I mean. Not that... I was... um."

"Is that a carrot?" he asked, leading her back around the corner, under the iron arch and into the clearing. The only 'wildlife' nearby was that old groundskeeper, as usual.

"I, um, got it from the buffet."

"The only raw carrots on the menu should be served on a bed of rice." He levitated the crispy root into the air and tossed it over to the groundskeeper. Despite having his eyes closed, the old pony managed to snag it out of midair with a snap of his jaws.

"M-m-m!" He groused to himself. "De-licious!"

Floating up the cardboard box, the stallion snapped it at the corners and folded it up into a neat square. Fluttershy bowed her head, fully expecting to be either reprimanded for her behavior, or thrown out of the garden, or the party, or worse. Tears welled up in her eyes at the spectacle she'd end up making. Not only would she be publicly humiliated; she'd never be allowed back. She'd never see a Wallaroo or a Toucan or a Senegal Parrot or a Hedgehog or a Honey Badger or a Red Panda bear or a Jackalope or a Wolpertinger...

"Miss Fluttershy," the unicorn's voice prompted her to look up. "Please don't cry. You aren't in trouble."

"I'm not?" she asked, sounding heartbreakingly hopeful.

He shook his head. "No. The animals in the Gardens aren't normal, you know."

"They... aren't?" Fluttershy asked, curiosity displacing worry. Her wings flexed happily, but then stilled as his words sunk in. "What do you mean?"

"That kangaroo over there, looking at us from behind that bush-"

He pointed a hoof to one of the hedges. The Wallaroo that she had seen before, but been unable to catch, was keeping a wary eye on them from behind the barrier. Its mouth was moving slowly as it chewed and stared.

"That animal was poached from a royal game reserve three years ago," he explained. "Its owner wanted it as an exotic pet."

"Oh," Fluttershy gasped, frowning. "That's not nice."

"It also kicked a pony, hurting them badly," the stallion added. "It's here, because auntie Celestia didn't want it put down, and because it can't survive in the wild anymore."

"That's terrible. That's... just terrible." Fluttershy wasn't one to get angry easily, but she really wished she had some way of righting what had happened to that poor creature. Her expression fell, dejected, as she realized that just moments ago, she had been chasing that same kangaroo.

"That vulture up there," he continued, making one last example. "Was brought in for falconry. Some foal believed he could train it like a common goshawk or kestrel. Almost every animal in this garden was captured wild. Most never saw a pony before they came here and many have been treated poorly."

"Miss Fluttershy," he implored. "Please. Look at me." She did, and saw that he was smiling amiably, just a hint of sadness in his eyes. "You're going to have to be very patient with them."

Oh. Oh. That made sense.

But...

"But I only have one night," she muttered.

"You can always come back, I promise," he assured her, leaning down a little to keep eye contact. "You can't rush friendship, now can you?"

She blinked the last of the tears from her eyes, and steadied herself.

"It took weeks for Angel Bunny to become my friend," she remembered, and nodded to herself, determination in her eyes. "Thank you so much!" She reached out, as if to hug the strange unicorn, and blushed, tucking her hooves in. "I mean. Thank you."

"It was my pleasure," he replied, still smiling despite her embarrassment. "If you like, I can help for a little while. I've had a lot of time to practice my bird calls recently, and I can introduce you to my young tercel, Dream Catcher."

"That - that would be wonderful," Fluttershy agreed, feeling better than she had all evening. "Um. But. You know who I am... but I'm afraid I don't know you. What's your name?"

"I'm at the grand galloping gala~
I'm at the grand galloping gala~
I'm at the grand galloping gala..."

Pinkie Pie sighed, alone at her table.

No one wanted to dance. No one *especially* wanted to dance with *her* after the spectacle she had made when she first came in. Everypony was avoiding her like she had the dreaded gum disease known as gingivitis! Even though she brushed her *teeth three times a day!* The big, boring, stuffy meanie-pants jerks!

Not a single pony had even once used the dance floor. It was just sitting there, oh-so alluringly shiny, and ponies were just standing about the chatting. All they did was talk talk talk talk talk. (Like you're any different). At least when Pinkie talked she had something to say, and possibly repeat, two or three times over. Why were all these ponies here, in the fancy, expensive DANCE room, if they weren't going to dance? It was as crazy as going to the kitchen to sleep! OH! Or going to your room to make cupcakes!

But wouldn't it be *super neat* if you could make cupcakes in your room?

Oh! Or sleep nearby while your muffins were in the oven?

(You're getting distracted) . Right. she was getting distracted. Distracted from *moping*. She had important moping to do. Stupid pretty ponies. Stupid mares in fancy dresses standing around. Stupid cute stallions drinking and ignoring her. Stupid, smelly Gala.

"Um. Pardon, everypony," a voice from the stage caused her ears to perk up. It was one of the band members. The - um - orchestra ponies. She cleared her throat again. "We've had a special request for a rather unorthodox song. Please bear with us."

Pinkie's ear did another little twitch.

"Hey, everypony!" That voice!

Looking up, Pinkie saw Spike sitting next to the piano pony, going over a sheet of music. She tilted her head in bemusement. What was Spike doing here? (What, you're asking me?). She knew the little dragon was quite skilled on the keys from the whole Appleoosa thing. But after she had been chased off stage herself, she doubted he could have just walked up and asked to participate. What was going on?

After a few seconds of prep time, Spike and the pianist, Sharp Note, began to play. The latter also slipped on a pair of sunglasses and cleared his throat in preparation for a vocal score.

Twitchy-twitch.

Soon a trumpet and saxophone started up, bringing home a tune Pinkie knew from somewhere. Not only her ear now, but her left hoof was twitching too. Her back hoof was also tapping, but that was due to the beat, not any sort of Pinkie Sense in action. Something was definitely about to happen!

Something fun!

"Well I heard about the fellow you've been dancing with
All over the neighborhood
So why didn't you ask me baby
Or didn't you think I could?"

Urge to dance.

Rising.

"Well I know that the boogaloo is out of sight
but the shingaling's the thing tonight
But if that was you and me a now baby
I would have shown you how to do it right!"

Rising.

"Do it right (U-huh)
Do it right (Do it right)

Do it right
Do it rightttt!
Aaahhhh!"

Too late. Her body was already flying out onto the dance floor!

And, to her surprise (silly pony, didn't I warn you?) she wasn't alone. For the first time this evening, somepony else was out on the dance floor, too! He was a unicorn, not really Pinkie's type, but he was dancing, and he was pretty good! She reared up and he grabbed one of her hooves, spinning her around in crazy circles. She hardly registered the shocked gasps of so many of the other staid and scandalized partygoers.

"Twistin', shake it shake it shake it shake it baby!
Hey we gonna loop de loop
Shake it out baby!
Hey we gonna loop de la!"

To her delight, he joined her in bending over and shaking his rear, his dark golden tail swishing scandalously against her dress.

"Bend over let me see ya shake your tailfeather
Bend over let me see ya shake your tailfeather
Come on let me see ya shake your tailfeather
Come on let me see ya shake your tailfeather
Aaahhhh!"

Spinning around, Pinkie stood on two legs and kicked in time to the music, bouncing and laughing as he joined her. It seemed impossible, but she couldn't help but wonder if this special request had been for her? (This was fun). *It was super duper fun with cherries on top!*

"Do the twist!"

Her dress swung from side to side and she flexed her hips.

"Do the fly!"

Flapping front legs switched from the 'buzz'-

"Do the swim!"

- to the 'sea pony' -

"And do the bird!"

- to the 'flailing pegasus' -

"Well do the duck!"

- Pinkie always thought this one should have been called 'the chicken' -

"Aaah, and do the monkey!"

- Front legs and hooves swinging, she faced to the side, bounced around opposite, and then faced him again.

"Hey hey, watusi!"

Stepping closer, the two held out their front legs and shifted from hoof to hoof.

"What about the boogaloo?

Oh, the bony marony!

And, ah, what about the food?

Aaahhhh!

Twistin', shake it shake it shake it shake it baby!"

By the time the song finished, Pinkie was ready to collapse into giggles.

It was just too bad that, before she could say anything, the Orchestral ponies quickly (too quickly, that was fun) switched to a slower, more traditional song. On the verge of returning to her table, happy at least to have had one fun dance, the pink party pony was surprised when a white foreleg stuck out to intercept her. Eyes wide, she realized her unknown partner was asking her to stay on the dance floor.

Even though it wasn't the same dance as before.

Even though everypony was still staring at them!

"Don't tell me you're tired already?" the white unicorn asked with a cheeky grin. "Pinkamena."

"Oh!" She gasped, but didn't do the normal briefly-suspend-oneself-in-midair trick. She *would* have, except he intercepted her in that, too, forcing her to stay on the ground.

"Do you know me from somewhere?" she asked, leaning closer.

"I've heard about you," he replied, tapping his hoof on the dance floor.

"Come on. Don't you want to know how to dance to this music, too?"

"I do!"

This... couldn't be... the Ménagerie Ursae?

It was packed; more than a hundred ponies had to be either in the room or trying to get in, forced instead into adjacent salons. Tables had been pushed back and up against the walls, and the air was filled with not just music, the sound of a hundred hooves moving on the polished floor.

Rarity had been waiting for Princess Luna to finish with her introductions, welcoming the last of the gentry to the Gala. At some point, however, she and her nephew had vanished. Convinced more than ever that she needed to find her would-be date for the evening, the fashionable unicorn moved from chamber to chamber, trying to catch sight or wind of him. As it was, some ponies did claim to have seen him, just rarely in the same place for terribly long.

"Hey there! Sugar cube!" A familiar voice called out. "Rarity! Hey, over here!"

Craning her neck, she saw the unmistakable hat that only Applejack would be wearing here. Squeezing through the crowd, Rarity quickly found not one but two of her missing friends: Applejack was busily pulling a shy pegasus behind her, Fluttershy softly muttering an apology every time she bumped into another pony. Applejack was all smiles and greeted her warmly with a hug, and despite her nervousness, even Fluttershy seemed to be in good spirits and she daintily touched hooves with her friend.

"My word," Rarity remarked, seeing her fellow Elements of Harmony in such a jovial state. She singled out the country mare in particular. "Don't you look like the cat that ate the canary!"

"I reckon I have a right'ta!" Applejack explained, tipping her hat back. "I darn near sold out tonight. Just put the rest of it away out back." She pointed back behind her in the general direction of where their carriage was parked. "Figured I'd spend the rest of the night seein' how everypony else was doin'."

"Well, that's good news!" she replied, and then asked her other friend, "What about you, Fluttershy? I rather expected you'd still be in the gardens?"

"Oh. Um. I mostly just came back to get something to eat," the nature lover explained. "I also wanted to thank... somepony.. for helping me."

"Ah knew there was another reason why ya came in, all blushin' like that!" Applejack threw a less-than-subtle wink Fluttershy's way.

"It isn't like that!" the pegasus protested, and shrunk back a bit. "I mean. Not really. Blueblood is very nice, and he even found a groundhog for me, but it isn't like that."

"Prince Blueblood?" Rarity asked, tilting her head in confusion. "You saw him out in the gardens?"

Fluttershy nodded. "He stopped me from... making a mistake... and since I *am* getting a little hungry, I sort of wondered where he had gone to?"

"Well, we can look for 'im and everypony else," Applejack said with a grin. "We got plenty 'a time before the dinner spread. You seen any ah our party around, Rarity?"

"Yes, well," Rarity gave her a brief rundown, dismissing some of her surprise at Fluttershy's news. "Rainbow's probably still with the Wonderbolts. I checked the lounge a little while ago but didn't see her. I'm sure Pinkie Pie is in the ballroom somewhere. Twilight disappeared with the Princess. Princess Celestia, of course... and, no, I have no idea where Blueblood is, so don't even ask."

"If you'll excuse the interruption." A monocled earth pony, who happened to be listening in by proximity, pointed towards the dance floor. "I couldn't help but overhear. You must not have heard? They're both out there."

"Out where?" Rarity asked, and squeaked as Applejack began leading her through the crowd, Fluttershy close behind. Much less polite about it than the cultured unicorn, the farmpony was both willing and able to push through when mares or stallions didn't readily yield to right of way. In their wake could be heard muttered, "oh, sorry. sorry about that. oh. sorry. oops. sorry."

What they soon saw left the fashionista's jaw agape.

Celestia herself was on the dance floor, wings unfurled and head swaying to the music as she glided around and in step with her nephew, moving freely and easily to the ballroom music. By simple virtue of size, color, and incomparable presence, she was the center of attention, but the immortal Princess was far from the only one dancing.

A pink bundle of energy, one Pinkamena Diane Pie, was close by, dancing with another mare who could only be Twilight Sparkle. All around them, dozens of other ponies were also paired off and enjoying themselves. Even Princess Luna was present, sipping from a long straw at a table, surrounded by a rainbow of would-be and seemingly emboldened suitors.

"Oh! Oh! Over here!" Pinkie Pie bounced straight up in the air, waving her front legs. "Oh! Hey!"

"Aw, Pinkie, yes, sugar, we see you!" Applejack blushed at the antics of her friend, waving to make sure she could stop telegraphing their presence to the entire world.

"The Princess is...?" Rarity was still gaping at the sight. "I don't believe it..."

Then her face fell along with her prospects.

"I'll never be able to dance with him now..."

Impossibly, Pinkie Pie's front legs stretched to pull them in closer once they entered Pinkie-range. The dynamo of energy wrapped her front legs around their shoulders and she started chattering at high speed, trying to fill their ears on current events. Rarity was only able to catch some of it. It did seem that the "party" portion of the Gala had picked up to an unusual degree.

A pink whirl later, and she'd switched Twilight with Applejack, trying to teach another friend the dance steps she had learned. Partnered with Twilight, Rarity settled into an easy place-step. The tired unicorn prodigy breathed a sigh of relief in not having to keep pace with their earth pony friend's boundless energy.

"Darling, you have to tell me, please," Rarity leaned in so she could be heard. "What's going on?"

"Oh, I'm not too sure myself," Twilight admitted. "This isn't anything like the Galas I read about." She glanced over her shoulder at her mentor. "But... the Princess sure seems to be enjoying herself."

"That's well and nice, but..." she sighed. "I guess I missed my chance."

Rarity couldn't help but glance past Twilight to where Celestia and Blueblood each had a hoof extended, swinging back and forth and ducking their heads in and out, manes shaking from the movement. The Princess whooped as he reared and she did the same, hooves playfully batting in midair. It was so... strange to see the normally dignified Celestia giggling and laughing at her own antics. Her nephew, too, seemed to be enjoying himself as they danced to the lively musical ensemble with its challenging piano score.

It took a second for Rarity to realize Twilight was staring, too, though probably more at her mentor than at the stallion. The dressmaker smiled knowingly and leaned close to the other unicorn.

"Why Twilight," she cooed. "Are you jealous?"

"N-n-no!" The bookworm too-quickly looked away, a faint blush darkening her cheeks. "Why would I be jealous? I mean, what would I be jealous of? ...About... nothing."

"If you say so, darling." Rarity stuck out her front leg. "Once around?"

Mimicking what she had seen Celestia and Blueblood do, Twilight touched her leg to Rarity's and the pair of mares spun around. It wasn't the most graceful move, but he was fun and they laughed. Rarity put aside her other worries for the moment and focused on helping Twilight work on her steps.

Really, it was just a matter of her relaxing a bit. A stiff dancer was a poor dancer.

Abruptly, the music became a slower, but still energetic concierto, punctuated with a bassoon instrumental solo. It reminded Rarity of the countryside, the day after Winter Wrapup - the fields coming into bloom for the first time, life renewed and a reward for the work put in by everypony in town. It was a beautiful and romantic piece, and as much as Twilight was her good friend, it was the kind of music she would have preferred to share with...

"Pardon me."

Suddenly, Rarity's partner was taken aside, spun, and switched for another. The studious mare only had time for an 'eep!' followed promptly by, "Princess Celestia? When did...?" And then: "Twilight! Isn't this a pleasant surprise? Oh. But maybe I should lead, dear."

"I hope you don't mind me pulling a switch like that," her new partner apologized, but clearly didn't mean it. "Miss Rarity."

"Prince Blueblood?" She almost stumbled in surprise but quickly adjusted her steps to match his. "How... forward..."

"Oh?" he asked, playfully. "Did you wish to dance with one of your other friends? Miss Pinkamena perhaps? I can-"

"Absolutely not!" Rarity had to stop him with a crystal-slippered hoof.

"Good!" He declared with an agreeable laugh.

They danced slowly and easily among the crowd of ponies, and as they did, Rarity envisioned what it must have looked like, to have this stallion change partners from Celestia, of all ponies, to her. The thought brought an ebullient blush to her cheeks. The press of bodies around them forced everypony to dance a bit closer than was usually proper, but the pair of unicorns still found it easy to match the rhythm of the other.

One musical piece turned to two, and then to three, the time flying by.

Rarity considered it a small blessing that the orchestra had gone some time without one of the more unconventional dances. She never would have guessed that anything but the most traditional baroque would be played at the Grand Galloping Gala of all events; but then, in the same vein, she never would have thought that the Prince and Princess would indulge in such music either. It wasn't necessarily inappropriate, but it was very... vivacious.

She had only seen a little of the stallion she had come to the Gala to meet, but so much what she *had* seen so far stretched her expectations. There was talk of him appearing all about the Gala here or there, greeting high society ponies even as he attended to one or another bit of business. According to Fluttershy, he had even found time to stop by the gardens for whatever reason, and knowing the sweet pegasus, she would not have been in the sections of the garden that other ponies would frequent. She suddenly felt woefully unprepared for a meeting she had waited for and dreamed about all her life.

"Miss Rarity," he ducked his head to ask in a conspiratorial whisper, catching her daydreaming. "What do you think of this year's Gala?"

"It's different," she answered, diplomatically. "Not in a bad way. But then... I haven't been to a Gala before tonight."

She leaned a little closer to him, hiding her face as she asked, "What do you think?"

"I think..." He seemed to think about it for a second. "I think this is the best Gala yet."

Spinning her around, Blueblood brushed his lips close to her ear.

"I should warn you," he whispered. "I promised a little dragon that he could dance with you, so I won't have you *all* to myself tonight."

"Aren't you done yet?"

"You know, you had a comparatively easy one."

"Can I at least turn around?"

"I'm almost done. Hold your horses."

"Very funny."

"You know, I completely forgot, I could just have used magic to do this."

"You haven't been...? Are you teasing me again, Prince Blueblood?"

"Perhaps, perhaps. Okay. Done."

It was approaching midnight, and Blueblood had escaped from the Gala after dinner. It was a special, specific time: there were no more emergencies or distractions. Just complications. The Gala itself would continue for another hour or so before the Princesses formally retired, signaling the end of the celebration. He had even booked a last minute performance to end the night with a bang, right before the fireworks display: a certain wayward illusionist down on her luck. Hopefully *that mare* could manage to contain herself and not insult any of the nobles in attendance.

Before then, Blueblood had headed outside.

Conveniently, he had also been followed.

He turned around and marveled at the topiary Rarity had cut. It wasn't simply a matter of practice: she had a real, genuine skill for this, a fact he had learned well. Next to her, the columnar hedge had been cut into the shape of his cutie mark. Even the proportions were spot-on. The plant itself was still alive, and glowed faintly with her magic from the transformation. It really was impressive that she could use pure-magic to transform a living thing, even one as simple as a plant, without really harming it.

Beside him, he had cut and arranged a trio of diamonds, using magic to keep the plant alive, warp it here and there, and even out the edges (and fill in the occasional natural hole). Rarity's mark had the diamonds separate from one another, so he had needed to carefully trim away the extraneous branches and add a little magical glamour to complete the illusion.

"Oh. Oh, it's lovely." She deftly slipped past him to examine his work more closely. "Did you add a little sparkle to it, too?"

"You actually shaded yours," he observed, whistling appreciatively at her topiary sculpture. The two tones of his cutie mark were copied in distinct shades of green.

"You didn't peek, did you?" she asked, teasing him as she rounded the sculpture.

"As if I would need to." He rounded and escorted her back into the open. "One glance was all it took."

Rarity blushed, having only shown her mark to him for a few seconds before they began making the sculptures. She'd genuinely surprised him tonight: even acting rather un-princely, she'd stuck around. He wasn't sure if it was tenacity or what. She was so stubborn in certain ways.

"Miss Rarity," he broached a topic that had bothered him before. "I've wanted to ask you, for a while now: why me? Out of all the stallions you could have been with tonight? Why is it me?"

"Oh." Her eyes darted away as she tried to avoid the question.

"Is it because I'm the... a Prince?" he guessed. "Is it because you read about me in some tabloid and caught your fancy?"

The strangest thing was that, at some point, he had come to want to believe it was more than that.

"I'd be lying if that wasn't a factor in it," Ponyville's trend setter replied; he sighed, expecting that answer. It explained the near-obsession she seemed to have in some loops. Most mares would be content simply to go to the Gala itself. Few thought to use the opportunity to woo the head of a noble family. Such as it was. Stringing those mares along had been a private thrill.

Yet...

"I see," he muttered.

"You aren't what I read about," she said, and his ears pricked.

"I'm not?" he asked, walking around her.

"Well, all those articles painted you as the most elite of the elite," she continued, grinning as he feigned appearing aghast. She shook a bare hoof in the air. "Prince Blueblood the fifty-second. Lord Grand Veneur. Most eligible bachelor in Canterlot. Destined to marry any number of the nobility's finest. A unicorn of impeccable taste and unmatched refinement."

"Actually, that does sound like me," he admitted with a chuckle.

"Nothing mentioned dancing, or... what was it? The 'sea pony swim'? Much less gardening and common topiary." Rarity's blue eyes danced with mirth.

"Do you know what I expected?" she asked. "I expected to spend the night stargazing, talking about art and being toured around the Palace."

He breathed in the brisk night air, suppressing a laugh.

"We do sponsor half the artists in the country, and auntie needs a place to store it all." Blueblood looked up and raised a hoof to eye level. "And it is a nice, clear night."

His gaze drifted from the stars to his company for the night, and grew serious. "Miss Rarity. You should know that I was never the pony you imagined me to be. If you had met me on a bad day, I think you would have been... very disappointed. The truth is that I've enjoyed driving mares away. I've enjoyed rubbing their faces in what I'm not."

She didn't seem thrown or put off by the supposed revelation.

Instead, Rarity watched him carefully and asked, "And why didn't you? You seem to know every pony at the Gala. You knew who I was. Why am I any different? Is it because I'm one of Twilight's friends?" Her face darkened just a little, like passing under the shadow of a cloud. "Is it because I happen to be one of the Elements of Harmony?"

Blueblood's demeanor changed, becoming pensive.

"Thinking back..." And the way he said it, it was as if it was years ago and not hours. "I think it was because you were the most beautiful mare in the Gala... and because I knew you were interested in me. It had nothing to do with Harmony. Or fame. Or honor."

He gave a ragged sigh, his words and memories distasteful. "When I was little, and other ponies used to use blocks to make castles and towers. I was the one who picked the nicest one... and kicked it. That was so long ago... but I still feel that part of me, in here." He tapped his chest, and frowned. "I think that's what auntie meant before. *That's* what she meant."

The silence between them stretched on, until Rarity touched her hoof over his.

"I don't believe you're that kind of pony anymore," she said it honestly, candidly. "And since you don't seem to be the Prince your press paints you to be, I think it proper I find out the real you."

"Then let me show you something."

Even as the night deepened, he took her into the Garden labyrinth. Few could navigate it on-hoof more quickly than he, though he normally refrained from following the course he knew by heart to the center. In all his loops, he had returned here only once before. Easily navigating the many twists and turns and false-leads, retracing the route he had first discovered on the day he got his cutie mark, he led her to the small, secluded center of the maze.

It was the Blueblood Family monument: a clean, pyramidal obelisk.

On it, the names of fifty three Bluebloods were engraved, from the first, to his name, to the name of his son or daughter. All were Blueblood. Those yet born would be Blueblood. Celestia and Luna would live forever. Blueblood, too, would live forever... in name if not in fact. Carved alongside all the heirs and progenitors of the line were their partners, long gone. Branches trimmed tight on the Blueblood tree.

"The day I got my cutie mark, I found my name on this stone. Right here." He reared up to press the tip of his hoof to a name half-way down the monument. "Each side holds ninety names. This monument is meant to honor three hundred and sixty generations of Bluebloods. I got my cutie mark when I discovered my place in the world. Right here." He tapped his name in the stone. "Right here."

"I used to think this was me." He dropped back down to all fours. "And I don't think I ever told anypony that before."

"But you shared it with me." Rarity, the Element of Generosity, pulled him away from the monument. "Why? I know it isn't just because you see me as a tower of blocks to knock over," she gently ribbed him. "Tell me. Please?"

"Because... because I had fun tonight," he admitted, facing her and not the future or the past. "Here with you, I'm not thinking about tomorrow." His smile became tinged with melancholy. "That probably sounds so mundane, but it means everything to me right now."

"I think I understand," she said, leaning close to him for warmth. "Tonight was the most wonderful night of my life. Tomorrow can take care of itself."

Overhead, fireworks exploded, filling the night sky with a sudden brief bloom of red and orange while a distant orchestra played Entry of the Princess into Light. Rarity turned her chin up, and Blueblood dipped down, stealing a quick, chaste touch of her lips. The pair stood for a short time, until a cool breeze blew in from under the moon. In the night sky, a trio of pegasi swirled, a rainbow streak against the horizon flanked by jets of light and fire.

"Miss Rarity. I'll teleport us inside if you say 'please.'"

"Honestly, Prince Blueblood. Making a lady beg is most unc-"

-pop-

*"You'll be seeing Rain Booms!
Ooo-ooo-oooh!
Equestrian Girls, we're kinda magical!
Boots on hooves, bikinis on top!"*

Blueblood found himself on his back, eyes bleary but open, staring up at the delicately tiled ceiling. The same: the same ceiling as always. Slowly closing his eyes, he sighed, a single, long lamentable breath that sapped the energy from his body. He began to reach out to turn off the damnable contraption.

*"Furry coats so cute!
We'll blow your mi-ind!"*

"Ugh, really, darling? You listen to this music, too?"

A soft white front leg swung across his chest, fumbling for a second before turning the radio off. It then retracted, bumping into his cheek along the way, as a body moved to his right, pulling away a corner of the blanket. A voice muttered something about 'a good customer, but an overrated musician.'

Turning slowly, Blueblood sniffed as a violet mane filled his vision.

Shooting upright, he gazed long and hard at the mare lying next to him, still in her Gala dress. Tentatively, he reached out and poked her side. She felt real. Genuinely, really-real. Still not entirely convinced he hadn't just gone mad - madder anyway - he sat still and watched her for a while. Rarity stirred, having already been sufficiently disturbed by the radio, and rolled onto her other side. Blue eyes fluttered open and gazed up at him.

"What?" she asked, catching him staring, and smiled.

"You're here," he whispered, wonderingly. "You're still here?"

She blinked again, starting to frown-

He quickly ducked down and kissed her, first on the lips and then just below the horn.

"You're still here," he said again, marveling at that fact.

Before she could reply, looking somewhere between confused and pleased, he kissed her again. What had been with the hesitation of a pony expecting a mirage to disappear the moment it came in reach now turned into the relieved intoxication of a drowning pony finally on the verge of rescue. Rarity cooed and then chirped as he nipped her ear.

"Prince Blueblood! Really!"

He sighed into her hair, and kissed her on the nose. "Miss Rarity... yesterday was the longest day of my life. You'll forgive me for feeling a little frisky."

Not quite understanding, she watched him with wide eyes.

Never once had he seen her in the morning before. She was breathtaking.

At the royal table, the Princess Luna sipped from her glass of dinner wine. The night had been quite tiring, for once, and she was looking forward to a good long nap while her sister managed the day. She wondered how some ponies, and some creatures like Miss Sparkle's dragon assistant, could manage to have so much energy, cavorting around the castle at all hours.

So many ponies had stayed up, even after the end of the Gala; some just milling about, others having fun. Even as exhausted as she was, and a little flushed at the attention she had garnered, the Princess couldn't help but look forward to next year. Perhaps she could have some late night fun before then, too. The winter solstice was the longest night of the year, and then there was this 'Nightmare Night' she had heard of...

Sitting close by, Luna's older sister nibbled on a plate of yucca fruits.

Seeing them reminded her-

"Where do you suppose Blueblood's gotten to?" she wondered, neither seeing nor nearing him this morning. Luna gave her sister a look. "And what's with that grin?"

Celestia studiously sipped from her cup of tea.

"It's been some time..."

Light Touch glanced up at the clock. It was almost eleven. Almost noon! Listening to the radio, once again playing 'Equestrian Girls,' her quiet partner Sandy didn't look up from where she lay on a sitting pillow.

"The Prince is usually awake by now," the older mare muttered, a bit worried. "I don't understand, isn't he going to call for us?"

Sandy shook her head, the timid filly had only one thing to say:

"Not today."