

The First Prince

By Chaucer345



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Chapter 1

Twenty Three

Make no mistake; I am as patient as I am fabulous. However even I have my limits. One of them is being interrupted on my morning walk, another is having my best cravat covered in mucous.

“Ugh” I said shoving the bizarre sobbing mare away. “Get off me you...” Of all ponies I found myself face to face with none other than Princess Luna.

Now I am a veteran of the *Doomed Gala*, so understand what I mean when I say that I had *never* seen a more disgraceful sight in life! The co-ruler of Equestria's tiara was crooked, her mane looked like a bur's nest and her eyes were discolored and puffy. Were I in a more charitable mood I might have recommended a nice trip to the spa... or at least some cucumbers.

She stared at my forehead and blinked. “I... I'm sorry... I thought you were someone else.”

I raised my head with a “Humph!” (She still towered over me of course, but it was the principle of the thing). “My lady you have the honor of addressing the sophisticated, world renowned, and *fabulous* Prince Blueblood the 23rd. You will also have the honor of paying his dry cleaning bill.”

Her eyes went wide and she broke into the most unseemly stutter. “W-wait Blueblood? T-twenty third?”

My butler coughed, shifting uneasily in his saddlebags. “Kind sir, perhaps-”

Oh not the staff too! Royalty was one thing, but impudence from hired earth ponies just couldn't be tolerated.

I let my voice go cold, “Top Hat, you will speak when spoken to, understood?”

The earth pony opened his mouth for a moment, then closed it and lowered his head. "Yes sir, my apologies."

I snorted, "Just don't think that dapper little cutie mark means you can't be replaced." That little problem nipped in the bud I turned back to the puffy eyed alicorn. "Now as for you..."

The princess narrowed her eyes. She had the most chilling look. For a moment I felt like I was back at the gala staring down a certain harlot. It was almost as bad a glare as mother's...

"You're the Prince? *You?*" For a moment it almost seemed like the sky grew dark.

I wanted nothing more at that instant than to just turn around and bolt. I felt all four knees start to shake...

No! I forced myself to be still. I didn't care how much power she had. I had embarrassed my family more than enough this season. A Blueblood cowered before no one, mother would accept nothing less. Besides... the cravat was already lost.

So I held my ground. I glared right back at the petulant goddess. "It is one of my many titles. You may note it is equal to yours, if not greater from more recent use. Now I believe you owe me some bits..."

For a moment her horn flared. Her eyes filled with some terrible black fire and I felt a quiver at the base of my horn and a shiver down my spine.

I took a few steps back, putting the petrified Top Hat between us.

Finally the Alicorn shook herself and her eyes returned to normal... though the tears were back for some reason. She lowered her head, "*Definitely* not who I thought you were."

That said her, horn glowed softly and she vanished in a silver puff of magic.

I blinked. "W-what in Equestria was that about?"

Bootblack shifted nervously, "I couldn't say sir."

I sighed. “Again, I wasn’t talking to you.” I got out in front of him and re-gathered my dignity. “Now come along. We’ve business to attend to.”

I supposed I’d just have to collect another way.

#

Twenty Three

One walk through the gardens, trip to the dry cleaners, light lunch, and shopping expedition later I found myself being brutally interrogated by our beloved ruler (she deigned to call it ‘dinner’).

Princess Celestia, sun goddess and ruler of all Equestria, gave me her most diplomatic smile. “Now, if we might discuss the back taxes owed by your province...”

I groaned and magically raised my teacup. I had to admit, it was an excellent brew. Princess Celestia had far more courtly graces than her sister even if she was a tad too soft. I’d been brought into the usual private tea room with its simple, but elegant decorations. It was actually quite cozy with its soft embroidered cushions and mahogany table. It even had a clear picture window with an excellent view of the night sky (a very fashionable addition according to *The Trotter*). Unfortunately it seemed like Celestia dragged me here every time I set foot in the palace so the décor had little effect on my mood.

“I’ve told you several times. I have less income since you suspended tax obligations in Fillydelphia. I’ve raised the income taxes on my other cities, but for some reason I’m even getting less revenue than before! It’s a mystery, but it certainly isn’t *my* fault.”

I eyed her for a moment, trying to gauge her reaction to my labors. Sadly, her expression remained as serene and diplomatic as always, revealing nothing. I was always envious of that composure.

Finally she spoke. “I’m quite sorry that you haven’t yet been capable of collecting from Fillydelphia, but you must understand that it requires a delicate managerial touch at the moment. After the parasprite swarm reconstruction efforts have been occupying a great deal...”

I tuned her out for a moment and sipped daintily at my tea. It was always the same with Celestia, construction efforts this, emergency funding

that... It amazed me how she could immerse herself in such trifles. They were just common folk after all, and they were ignoring their financial duty to the crown.

In any case there were more important things to ponder, such as why my new cravat was chafing even after I'd specially selected a softer fabric! I swear the injustice of it all! Perhaps I should have paid another visit the tailor and...

"...so I've been thinking of getting you gelded..."

I twitched and dropped my tea cup with a crash. "What was that?"

Celestia Beamed, "Just getting your attention. You see raising the income taxes even higher was probably the worst thing you could have done if wanted to raise tax revenue. Have you heard of a Laffer curve?"

"Umm..."

"They're quite interesting actually. You know, there's a tax economics course being offered next semester at Canterlot University..."

I went more white than usual. *That* was a real threat. At some point the princess had decided to forcibly enroll me in a class as a cruel punishment for any random misfortune that befell my province. I still had nightmares about calculus... Oh I'd have to think fast!

Finally it came to me, "Princess Luna owes me about nine hundred bits! Certainly you could start there?"

Celestia blinked. "I'm sorry... *Why* does my sister owe you nine hundred bits?"

I rolled my eyes. "Oh it was the most dreadful thing! This morning I was minding my own business walking through the garden when all of a sudden she just leapt out of the bushes, grabbed a hold of me and started bawling into my coat. She ruined a very expensive (and sentimentally valuable) cravat and when I tried to get her to pay for the damage she just said I was "definitely not who she thought I was" and teleported away to who knows where. Also, I must say she looked simply *awful* for some reason I don't know what she did to her hair, but-"

I stopped; Celestia's face had gone cold. "What did you do to her?" she asked, lowering her voice.

I froze. She was blaming me? For Luna's random snit? How could she possibly blame me? I was *not* going to be sent to another etiquette course over this!

I caught sight of her eyes and suddenly the righteous indignation drained from me. Facing down Luna was one thing, but this Mare... "Um, I, Nothing! Honestly! Nothing whatsoever!" I blurted, "She just said that she thought I was someone else and then that I wasn't who she thought I was! That's it! I suppose she was disappointed for some inane reason..."

Celestia looked like she was about to prod me further, but then stopped. Her eyes went wide. Suddenly she looked very old... or perhaps very young. I'd known this woman since the day I was born and this was the most off balance I'd ever seen her.

"Skies above," She whispered, "You really do look like him."

The lack of propriety was beyond appalling, but my indignation had been overwhelmed by fear. Underneath it all I felt... curious. "Who exactly?"

Her horn glowed for a moment and she ladled a drop of honey into her tea. "Your many times great grandfather. He was the prince a thousand years ago, the first prince."

Oh was that all? Thank the heavens! I allowed myself a smirk. "Well I suppose I'm glad to hear I'm descended from a line of fabulous looking unicorns, but-"

"He was an earth pony." She said, stirring in the honey. She sounded completely sincere, and I had never known her to lie.

I felt a strange sinking feeling. An *Earth Pony*? No, impossible, I'd sat down with mother and learned every last cousin in my noble lineage when I was five. We were unicorns, we had always been unicorns! "Your majesty I..." I hesitated, "apologize, but you must be mistaken." She said nothing. She just floated up her blasted napkin and stared at it like it was the most important thing in the world.

“There is no commoner blood in these veins!” I shouted, “We Bluebloods are a family of the gods... *Your family!*”

She turned to me with those ancient eyes and for a moment I felt... I'm not sure... like I'd left the house unclothed and without a grooming, or mother was calling, or something. Like she'd peeled back every flap of skin and saw all there was to see.

Then she turned away, “Prince Blueblood the First was an earth pony.” She said simply.

I glared at her. Goddess or no! Ruler or no! I would not let that insult pass! “Well fine then, why did Luna want a stupid smelly earth pony on the throne instead of a cultured and elegant unicorn like me?”

Princess Celestia, sun god, expert diplomat, and ruler of all Equestria, responded very calmly.

“Because he was better than you.”

One

The pegasus guard kept his hoof on my neck. “Your majesty I advise you against this.”

“Captain Heart, I can handle myself for 10 minutes. Please leave us...” Came a voice.

The steel clad pony gave me a warning growl. I glared back up as menacingly as my black eyes would let me. *You want to go another round Chuckles? Go on and bring it...*

“Captain!”

The Pegasus reluctantly removed his hoof, “I'll be right outside the door pretty boy. Please, go right ahead and try something. I dare you.”

“I love you too.” I croaked.

He snorted and waltzed out, wings flared in agitation. “Ten minutes...” He threatened. Then he slammed the door behind him.

Once I stopped seeing double I forced myself onto all fours and surveyed my surroundings. There were things on the wall that could have fed Ponyville for a month if you knew where to hawk them. It also had a large picture window. I seriously considered jumping out of it.

On the far side of a table covered in a motley assortment of cups and pots sat the heir to the throne, looking very small, and a lot less than royal without her guard.

I drew in a breath and felt a crackle in my lungs, "Princess Celestia..." I wheezed "to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Her horn glimmered faintly as she floated up a pile of papers. She smiled at me, politely. "Organizer Blueblood, I apologize for the... harsh way in which the Royal Guard construed the order to bring you here. Do you require time to rest, or something to eat or, um... medical assistance? I mean... the hospitality of Ever Free Castle is at your disposal."

I coughed up a gob of... something, and the pain in my lungs eased a bit. There was a coppery taste in my mouth, which *really* wasn't a good sign, but I would take what I could get. "I think I've had enough of your *cough*... hospitality, thanks. Now why am I here? I knew Seasons was low, but I didn't expect her to send a 14 year old to off me."

The Alicorn filly bit her lip. I noticed that her plain pink mane was almost as trashed as mine. "I... regret to inform you that Queen Seasons has passed away."

My bruised eyes went wide. "She's dead?"

She gulped. "Yes."

Time froze. Dead? That monster was actually *dead*? I felt a glimmer of hope, not for me, I was hosed, but everyone else! I had half a mind to break into a bucking jig right then and there! I knew there had been rumors, no *whispers* of an illness, but sweet skies... the witch was dead and the world hadn't ended! Ha! So much for 'raising the sun' every morning I couldn't wait to see the look on Wind's...

I saw Celestia flinch and slowly my joy drained away.

Seasons had ruled the land with an iron fist for *millennia*, the suffering and horror she had caused was beyond my capacity to comprehend. She was cruel, oppressive and I'd spent half my life cleaning up after her.

But right then, looking at that terrified little pony, I realized she was someone's mother.

"I... I'm sorry." The words just tumbled out. "I-I can't say I'm really mourning, but I... I know what it's like to lose family." A flood of bitter memories came, a letter at school, a tiny red stain, a royal seal on a scorched door. My voice went cold. "Actually a lot of ponies do."

She flinched, but forced herself to go on. "I-I understand that mother was a quite, um, f-forceful ruler and Luna and I going to have a lot of work to become as trusted as she was." She pulled a folder from the pile. "Seriously, I do know where you're coming from. I've read your file, and... well a lot of other files... and I understand the... everything I really do, but right now-

Now that, *that* I couldn't take.

I ground my teeth and rammed my hooves on the table. Carefully arranged china scattered. "You understand? You *understand*? Princess, your little pampered flanks Don't. Know. Shit! Seasons *never* had her victim's trust. They just prayed to the old gods that she'd keep up their rations and did their best to smile when she dragged off their children..."

A flash. A colt dragged away. Two pegasi holding guard "recruitment" badges and blades in their teeth. A father gripping a pitchfork... and dropping it on the ground, knowing he couldn't do any good. A pony finding a pamphlet... and walking away from his fields. Then another, and another...

I smirked, "Well, at least until I gave 'em a better idea."

Her expression darkened. "I remind you that whatever their justification, your "demonstrations" may have cost everyone in Equestria a harvest. I've been going over the ledgers and I assure you. Come this summer ponies are going to go hungry."

I narrowed my eyes. "If you want food, then strap on a plow. My people are used to cropping grass in the gutter all winter. This time you

magical ponies get to have a taste.” I put my fore-hooves on the lace tablecloth and lifted myself as high as I could get. “And don’t think for a second you can beat your apples out of me. I’m ready for whatever dungeon you’ve got...” I dug a bruised hoof into the table and let out shaky breath. “I promise you, I’ve seen worse.”

She ducked her head, rifled under the table, and came back up with a scroll in her teeth. “72%” She said, letting it drop by her teacup.

I blinked. “What?”

Her horn sputtered and she telekinetically tossed me the scroll. It bore the royal seal. “From now on, the earth ponies will be granted 72% of the yearly crop to dispose of as they wish, in reflection of their population size and labor. Whatever they don’t eat, they can sell and consider as payment for damages.” She narrowed her eyes. “Of course, as the proclamation provides earth ponies a *percentage* of total crops if they don’t produce anything...”

“I get the picture.” I popped the proclamation open with a hoof and looked it over. I’d always had a bit of a talent for cutting through legal horse-apples (my professors called it ‘issue spotting’), but I didn’t need it. I was surprised at how straight forward the proclamation was. It was exactly what she said.

I felt a shiver down my spine. If I’d left that seal unbroken... I pushed the thought away. What was done was done. “This is... good.” I let it roll shut, “Too good, what’s the catch?”

She smiled. “I want to adopt you.”

I blinked “Okay... you obviously don’t mean that literally...”

Her smile became a beam. . “Actually, I’m quite serious. I want to adopt you into the royal family. I want you to take on the title of prince and start representing the earth ponies in court. You’re widely respected by your people, you’re an excellent organizer and none of your... well public demonstrations were violent.”

“Captain Tightie bucked first.” I said through gritted (if loosened) teeth.

“Yes...” She said. She looked genuinely concerned. “I-I’ll have to talk to him about that, but it’s beside the point. Equestria’s Earth Ponies need a representative in government and you’re perfect for the job! You’re widely respected, you have experience leading people, and you’ve even been to law school.”

She put her hooves together and gave me a completely innocent smile.

I rolled my eyes. “Princess do you honestly believe I’ll swallow that tripe?”

The smile faded She tilted her head in confusion. “What? What that tripe? I’m offering you a position just underneath the royals! Mom... Queen Seasons did basically the same thing with Cesar in 293!”

“Uh, how about Caesar was a pegasus with Cloudsdale at his disposal and a magically charged army that could match her? You seriously expect me to believe you’re just going to roll over and make concessions this *massive* when you know you have the force and authority to just round up ponies like me and make examples of us?”

Her floating teacup shook and I saw a bead of sweat roll down. “I assure you I intend to be a benevolent a-and honorable ruler, I-”

I leaned over the table and looked her right in the eyes. “Little girl, I. Am. Not. Stupid! If you want a gods damned puppet you’ll have to tie me up in strings! You monsters spent the last 500 years keeping us in the dirt, and you’ve never had a problem butchering us before. What? All of a sudden you’re saying “Let’s all be friends!” *Please!* Why in Equestria would-”

“BECAUSE WARM BREEZE IS DEAD!” She screamed.

Princess Celestia, new ruler of Equestria, had a horn fizzle, spilled her priceless teacup all over her notes and crumpled to the floor.

I took a step back in surprise.

“S-she was just playing” She babbled, “They took her away and I wanted to stop them, but Mom said we couldn’t be soft and so I didn’t and now Mom is gone and it’s all too late and we lost them both and Luna’s being quiet and I know something’s wrong, but I don’t know what to do! A-

and I looked at the records and there's like a million Warm Breezes and when I try to think about all their friends and put together all the pain in a big pile I just *can't!*"

Tears pooled up and her nose went runny, she gave me a look straight from a nightmare. "I need to make this stop okay?. And for some stupid reason I thought you'd care about that *Organizer*."

Finally the fire in her eyes burned out and she started sobbing, becoming a big quivering ball of misery on the gilded carpet.

I run my mouth like most ponies breathe, so understand what it means when I say I was speechless.

When she was done, I pulled a napkin off the table napkin and blotted that poor filly's face, she tensed up when I got close, but let me clean her up all the same. Then I sat down next to her and brushed her mane from her eyes. I think it was about five minutes before she spoke.

"I just can't do it... I can't see them suffer, and I can't look away... Mom could... I-I think there's something wrong with me."

I turned her head and gave her a serious look. "No Princess. I think there's something very right with you."

I helped her up and brushed her off a bit. Then I reached up to the table and nudged open the proclamation. "So, you want me to work for you?"

She nodded.

I smiled and put a hoof on her shoulder. "I think I can do that."

She smiled back for a moment, and then started crying again. I wrapped my hooves around her and let her get it out. She shuddered in my grasp and-

All of a sudden the door burst open, the lock spell shattered by the sheer force of the captain's buck. I vaguely registered that my horseshoe was right next to his crying charge's head before he launched himself towards me in a silver and white streak.

"HOOVES OFF THE PRINCESS!"

Twenty Three

“... and then Captain Heart rammed his fore-hooves right into Blueblood’s head!” Princess Celestia clacked her floating salt shakers together for emphasis.

“Blueblood turned with it so he didn’t crack his head open, but Heart went left and...”

I sheepishly raised a hoof.

The princess paused. “Yes?”

I shifted uncomfortably, “Um... are these graphic descriptions of how the Royal Guard beat up my ancestor really essential to the story?”

“Well, it *is* how he got to know his coltfriend.”

“What?!”

Chapter 2

Twenty Three

“That doesn’t make any sense! If he was a colt cud-”

“Language.” The princess interjected.

I froze, She was wearing her “slightly disapproving” look. There was a rumor around court that the gryphon ambassador had been on the receiving end of her *truly* disapproving look once and slit his own throat to escape it. Celestia had him rushed to the hospital and sat by his bed till he woke up.

Then, she gave him the look again.

“Homosexual!” I corrected rapidly, somehow growing even whiter. “Um... how could he possibly have founded...” A perfectly reasonable and extremely comforting thought occurred to me.

I clapped my hooves together, “Oh of course! He adopted a unicorn who inherited his title!” The relief was palpable. I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding. “You had me worried for a second there. I thought you were talking about my bio...”

The princess held up a hoof. “Firstly, even if your presumption was true, it would not make him any less your kin. Secondly, while I commend your logical reasoning, you are incorrect. You are his direct descendant biologically as well as socially and legally.” She reached out with her telekinesis and picked up a piece of toast from the tea tray. “In any case, I don’t understand why you wouldn’t want to be genetically related to him, aside from the occasional injury, he was perfectly healthy.”

I was flabbergasted. “Your Highness, you *just* told me he was a rabble rousing, homosexual, *Earth Pony*.”

Celestia buttered her toast. “Your point?”

It took all of my culture training to suppress an aneurism. “Well... What about when he made you cry? That wasn’t nice!”

Her butter knife froze in mid flight. “I’m very sorry, what was that?”

I blinked. “Um... he made you cry? It’s, uh... not nice, to make people cry.”

She lowered her food, untouched and gave me an extremely serious. “Blueblood, I need you to do me a favor and remember that statement. Can you do that?”

“... Okay, I suppose,” I replied, utterly baffled. “But in any case, the man clearly had no courtly credentials at all! How in Equestria did you get him accepted by the council?”

She sighed and shook her head. “I had to be very persuasive...”

One

It was comfortably warm in the castle gardens, even before the break of dawn. Don’t get me wrong, normally I liked a little warm weather, but now it had a sinister edge to it. Every extra bit of heat made the conditions got worse and worse for planting. The pleasant late spring air was a constant reminder that time was running out. Of course, the big honking magically fed water clock by the hedge was probably an even better symbol if you could actually tell the time from it, but I wasn’t very abreast of the latest magical technologies.

The silver furred, steel eyed pegasus looked at me with disgust. “Captain Heart, you are to take this outlaw into custody.”

The guard narrowed his eyes. “General, I have royal orders are to keep the prince safe.”

General Storm snorted in anger. “Damnit boy, this is bigger than you and me! Now take this treasonous earth pony to old gods damned stockade or you I *will* make you regret it.”

The Captain didn't even flinch. "I have my orders, *sir* and oath is directly to Celestia. When you become my commanding officer I'll let you know."

The old pegasus snarled, "You miserable little spit fuck, if you aren't stallion en-"

"General *please*," came a foppish looking unicorn with a wineglass cutie mark. "you are a peer of the realm and such language is certainly not merited." He puffed out his chest

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you esteemed Speaker, it's good to know-"

"We'll wait until the princess gets here and then demand that *she* arrest his treasonous, racially inferior arse."

'-*that you nobles can be reasonable*' died on my lips. I sighed and turned to Heart. "Tough crowd eh?"

The captain just stood there, teeth gritted menacingly like a constipated statue.

I shook my head and eyed the water clock. Again, I didn't know how to read the darn thing, but the glass basin sure seemed a lot more full than when I'd first come out here. It was still pitch black though, so Celestia must have sent her messengers in at 4 am or something, making everyone worse for lack of sleep. The idea was to have a pre-meeting in the gardens with the top three ministers before announcing my appointment to the council of lords at large, but we'd been out here for what felt like ages and we were *still* waiting on the princess.

Well, there was nothing for it really. I gritted my teeth, turned to the foppish unicorn and put on my most diplomatic smile "Look, Speaker Shimmer, I know that we've been on opposite ends of more than a few issues, but we both-"

The unicorn rolled his eyes and floated a Cubano de Paso cigar out of the breast pocket of his gorgeously tailored suit. "I'm sorry anonymous voice from nowhere, I don't speak to ponies without enough magic to light one of these."

I trotted up and smiled even harder. “Here, let *me* get that for you.” That said I reared up on my back legs and rammed my forehooves together. My horseshoes squealed with the sound of metal on metal and sparks rained down.

The little roll of tobacco ignited instantly. The unicorn was so stunned he dropped it.

“Smart move, smoking is bad for you. Anyway...” I dropped the façade and turned to the assembled nobleponies “Look, I have a lot of good reasons to hate your measly stinking guts and you have lots of racist reasons to hate my measly stinking guts, but the princess has very explicitly declared that we’re going to be running the country together, so we might as well set our differences aside right now and get to the freaking running.”

“Spoken like a pony with no political experience whatsoever.” Came the third and final noble. She was an immaculately, though not extravagantly, groomed unicorn and a bit of a puzzle actually. Celestia’s note had identified her as Aurora Lights, the Archmagus of Everfree Tower, but my experience with magi was limited to herding ponies away from their fire spells so that didn’t tell me much. She wore no adornment except for a pair of spectacles and a bronze medallion around her neck.

Even her cutie mark was mysterious, just a purple burst with white stars around it.

She trotted past the other two and gave me an appraising look. “Organizer Blueblood, you do realize that you’re completely out of your league here correct?”

I shrugged. “Nope, I’m way too arrogant for that sort of thing. Oh, and it’s Prince Blueblood. I have a waxy piece of paper that says it and everything.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t have expected you to care so much about titles.”

“Oh, I don’t, but I suspect the gentlecolts behind you do.”

General Storm gritted his teeth. “Oh now that’s true enough sonny. I care quite a bit about how you manipulated a little filly’s conscience for political gain. It’s *extremely* motivating.”

I blinked and ducked my head around Aurora to give him a questioning look. “What?”

The Pegasus snorted, “What? Season’s dies and all of a sudden the man who convinced a whole mess of perfectly honest earth ponies to become god damned revolutionaries gets himself a seat on the throne?” He raised himself into the air with a few powerful wing strokes and hovered over the Arch Magus to glare at me. “You’re an old gods damned *manipulator* Blueblood and it doesn’t take someone of your skill level to make a terrified little girl do something stupid.”

He stretched out his neck and got right in my face. “Well it just so happens that Celestia has, older, less treasonous ponies who care about her. I *guarantee* that once we get a chance to set her straight your body will be on the dung heap and your head will be flying over the lower quarter on pike as a warning to the rest!”

Before he could say anything else to make me uncomfortably respect him, Heart’s wing shot out between us to the general’s neck with a surprising metallic *shing*. At the close proximity I saw he had a *blade* strapped under his wing. Even on the blunt (and surprisingly snugly) side it was more than a little unnerving.

“That’s close enough, General.” He said. There was ice in his voice.

To my great surprise, Storm did not back down. He narrowed his eyes and turned to the guard with a look of utter revulsion. “You little shit, you actually kept it.”

“Back UP!” Heart retuned, holding his wing taught. “I have Royal orders. The prince will not be harmed!”

I heard the tiniest quiver in his voice.

I stretched my neck over Heart’s wing and shoved my head against the General’s “You heard him Storm. Back away, from both of us.”

I saw the muscles in Storm's foreleg tense and heart's wing started to shake as the old general glared down at him. There was another shing as the general stretched out a wingblade of his own... and then popped out of existence.

Heart and I blinked stupidly at the empty air for a moment. Speaker shimmer gasped.

Aurora... looked extremely bored.

She walked calmly over to the gauge on the water clock and started a little countdown. "four... three... two..."

Storm popped back into existence in three feet in front of her. He then collapsed to the perfectly mowed grass and started twitching uncontrollably. His wings were glued tight to his back and his eyes were wide with fear. "Wh-what was that place!?"

She sighed. "In desperate need of wallpaper." She put her fore hooves on the dripping hunk of granite and tilted her head.

Heart and I exchanged a look. I blushed, and slowly untangled myself from his wing as he lowered it to the ground so the blade wouldn't nick me. It was a delicate operation in the dark, and I felt a little shiver down my spine as that deadly weapon inched away and those soft feathers ran across my-

"In any case general," The Archmagus began, interrupting my train of thought. "Whatever her reasoning, I think it's safe to say that Celestia sincerely wanted the organizer in power. This intimidation is no half-hearted measure."

Speaker Shimmer raised an eyebrow. "My dear Magus what on earth are you talking about?"

She rolled her eyes, raised her hoof, and pointed to the clock. "Speaker, it is 10 o'clock on a late spring day and the sun is not yet up."

I froze. Utter silence fell.

Then, as if on cue, a light appeared in the east. It got brighter and brighter and soon the massive ball of fire that warmed the planet appeared and flung itself up in the sky at break neck speed. It rose so fast it burned a

brilliant streak on the horizon and blinded us all in a burst of light as the ground trembled beneath us.

And flying up with that flaming orb, moving faster than any Pegasus I'd ever seen, was a little pink maned filly with a picture of the sun on her flank.

Princess Celestia drifted down to our speechless little party and beamed at us. "Esteemed Colleagues! Thank you all for coming. I apologize for the delay, I must have overslept. Now, are there any questions or concerns regarding my recent appointments?"

Twenty Three

My eyes went wide. "Well... that was... very impressive, but you must admit he didn't make a good first impression."

The princess laughed, her rainbow mane bouncing lightly. "Oh I wouldn't be so sure..."

One

Heart and I had barely set foot back in the castle when Archmagus Aurora appeared in front of us. Literally, she just *appeared* out of thin air. No explanation, no burst of light, barely a shimmer from her horn.

"Organizer Blueblood, It is imperative that we speak, and I'm sorry Captain, but I'm afraid this will need to be a private conversation."

Heart drew defensively to my side and I rolled my eyes. I'd spent the entire day in council meeting and I'd severely overdrawn on my allotment of patience. Trying to get nobleponies to stop fighting over scraps of power and do their jobs was like pulling teeth.

"Archmagus Aurora, with all due respect, if you think I'm going to follow you into some back hallway so you can quietly do away with me you're completely bucking *batty*. And once again, it's Prince."

She faithfully imitated my eyeroll. “Firstly, I call you ponies by the titles they’ve earned, not the titles they find legally convenient. Secondly, if I wanted to kill you I could just teleport you into a volcano.”

I groaned. “Look, you may logically think I’m an uneducated rube given the miniscule ammount of money that gets spitefully drizzled on the earth pony school system, but I know my old gods damned geography! I admit, your teleportation is extremely impressive, but there isn’t an active volcano within a hundred miles of Everfree so if-”

“Oh for pity’s sake! Fine, we’ll do this the hard way.” Aurora’s horn glowed and a green bottle of what appeared to be flaming kerosene burst into existence over her head. She then flicked her mane back and telekinetically flung it straight for... Heart.

Without even thinking I tackled the metal clad Pegasus and flung him to the ground. My ribs screamed at me at me in protest as we rammed into the stone floor and sparks flew from Heart’s armor.

He was low enough, I wasn’t. The bottle smashed against my back and my whole body erupted into flame! I screamed in agony as the fire consumed me and then...

into...

pieces...

Belch!...

...what?

The wind rushed past me at break neck speeds as my stiff borrowed suit billowed around me. I shook my head in a desperate bid to clear my vision, I could barely breathe... First there were clouds, then I was in the clouds, then I saw trees underneath me...

Oh *buck*.

I looked down as the landscape below rapidly magnified. Adding insult to assassination, I was directly over a volcano.

Right about when my colthood gymnastic lessons finished flashing before my eyes, I felt a sickening lurch and the volcano slid from beneath me. Half a second later I noticed I wasn't falling anymore.

I slowly turned my creaky neck around and caught sight of my rescuer, or at least his foot. I looked up... and up... and up, and finally caught the eye of a massive purple dragon smiling down at me.

"Well, well, well..." His voice boomed through the heavens. "Looks like Aurora owes me five bits."

There was a burst of purple light and a certain four-eyed archmagus appeared, now sporting a massive pair of I shit you not, *rainbow colored butterfly wings*. "Huh," She said, looking genuinely impressed. "Not bad, not bad at all."

I took the most reasonable course of action available and started puking my guts out.

#

Twenty three

Celestia cleared her throat, "And then..."

Knock Knock

I blinked at the noise and turned blearily to the door.

"Yes?" Celestia asked, suprised.

The door opened and a royal guardsman walked in, giving a reasonably proper bow. "A thousand pardons your Majesty, but the buffalo ambassador is awaiting you in the parlor. I believe you had an appointment."

Celestia tilted her head. "I beg your pardon sergeant, but that's not until..." she stopped and her eyes went wide. I followed her gaze to the intricate grandfather clock. Heavenly sisters it was 10! I'd missed my evening chocolate and nearly two *hours* of beauty sleep!

Celestia was on her feet in an instant. "Prince Blueblood I'm sorry, but afraid we'll have to adjourn- "

“Wait what?” I protested instantly, rising to my feet. “Your Majesty can’t possibly stop there! How did he escape the dragon? What bad blood lead to the spat between Heart and the general? What was the Archmagus doing? How did the palace react to the Tower’s treachery? What happened with the famine? And for the love of the Sun! How did a gay earth pony end up with tiny, unicorn babies!?”

The guard blinked and gave Celestia a confused look. She returned an almost sheepish smile. “Well, you see...” she caught sight of the clock once more. She lowered her head and sighed.

“I’m sorry Blueblood. Truly, I am, but we’ve already been speaking far longer than scheduled and I have a duty to the rest of the court. Sergeant if you’d be so kind as to escort me.” She started towards the door.

I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t think. “But, but you don’t understand!” I blubbered. “This is my family, my history, my origins. I’ve never heard any of it and... and I think it’s important. I need to know, I *want* to know! **Please!**”

Celestia froze in mid stride.

The froze in confusion. “Uh... Ma’am?”

Celestia turned to face me. She had a serious, almost... hopeful... look.

“Sergeant Sheild,” She began, her voice full and commanding, “please apologize to Coyote Waltz for me, tell him I’m occupied with an important family matter and I’ll meet with him as soon as I can. Please assure him no slight to his great nation is intended.”

Hearing her tone, the guard saluted and marched off down the hall. Celestia closed the door and sat back down and turned to me. “Now, where was I? Did I get to Luna yet?”

Chapter 3

#

Twenty Three

Celestia took a deep draught of her tea and straightened right back into her customarily regal posture. “Fortunately for all of our sleep schedules, Aurora got straight to the point...”

#

One

“Welcome to Pyrian Airspace organizer, I can understand that you may have questions, but what we have to say is incredibly important and I just committed high treason by snatching you. We have a lot of ground to cover and only so long before the rest of the tower finds a way to track my teleportation spell, so I need you behave like a reasonable pony and keep your mouth shut. Can you do that?”

“My mouth?” I put a hoof to my chin. “I dunno, you’re asking a lot...”

The Archmagus winced and the dragon keeping me airborne let out a chuckle. “My dear, you always find such entertaining companions...”

Lights’ ears twitched. “Look, here’s the deal; you need help, and I need to help you. And while I can’t say your political leadership has been all that inspiring so far, with the princess at your back you’re currently the earth ponies’ brightest hope for a better life. I can’t ignore that sort of thing, not in good conscience.”

She fluttered her wings and floated easily upward, “You’re going to need a few things if you want to do this right.” She reached the dragon’s head and smiled. “That’s where we come in.”

I blinked, “Wait... are you saying you *kidnapped* me so that you could throw your support behind the earth pony cause?”

She clopped her fore-hoves together. “Precisely.”

I felt like I'd suffered a sledgehammer blow to the face, and the equivalent brain-cell loss "Wha? Bu-" I twitched," Hasn't anypony in this crazy place heard of appointments! Urg!"

I flung my hooves up. "You know what? Fine! Second time this week! Break out the snacks!"

Lights and the dragon exchanged a look. "Pardon?"

"Oh come on, all my *other* kidnappers gave me snacks! Empire gave me pie, Celestia threw a tea party..."

The dragon looked thoughtful. Aurora just rubbed a hoof against her temple. "I'll admit... it might be easier to have a conversation with you with some salt and a few jugs of cider in my syste, but I'm afraid I hadn't the foresight."

"I assure you though, the kidnapping was well thought out and entirely necessary." She locked onto my eyes, "In fact, it brings me to the first thing you'll need for this venture."

I bit, "What's that?"

"A lesson in politics." She fluttered back down to my level, "Tell me, do you know why I decided to steal you away?"

I shrugged (chafing dragon claws be damned!) "You like following royal trends?"

She shook her head, "No... I didn't want it to look like I was helping you."

"Come again?"

She flapped her brilliant wings and rose once more, but unlike before, the dragon followed suit and slowly a thin range of mountains rose on the horizon. Then the archmagus pointed a hoof.

"See those mountains? On the other side of them lies a castle where nearly everypony is starving for power. They're so desperate, in fact, that there was a time when they sought to claim it at the expense of their fellow ponies lives. Seasons put a stop to the open warfare millennia ago, but the battles rage on. They're a bit less bloody in the open, but I assure you lives

are lost and cities crumble over the squabbles of the council of lords... It's gotten to the point where nopony can ever really trust each other."

She lowered her hoof and turned back to me. "The short of it is; if I openly tried to help you, then everypony in that bleeding madhouse would assume I had some ulterior motive or convoluted scheme and would do everything in their power to stop me."

I raised an eyebrow "Wait, You're telling me you *don't* have an ulterior motive?"

"Don't be ridiculous, of course I do, that's not the point."

I blinked. "You know, most ponies wouldn't be so quick to admit that sort of thing."

She sighed. "Alas, honesty is a personal failing of mine. I admit; it is most unbecoming in a leader."

She turned to the horizon, "What's important is that by kidnapping you and only helping you politically *after* the incident, I will heavily imply to the rest of court that I threw a tantrum and then traded some favors in exchange for a pardon. When I continued to help you long after the fact they'd probably assume you backed your claim on my services with some compromising letters you forced out of me to ensure I'd keep the bargain. Hmm..." She tilted her head adopted a thoughtful look, "Now that I think about it I might want to fabricate some for you..."

I took a moment and tried to imagine what sort of hideous alien creature would think like that.

Oh wait... politicians.

Still there was something else off about her story.

I narrowed my eyes. "If that's true, then why did you throw that Molotov dragon-tail at Heart instead of me? You couldn't possibly have known I'd block it."

She turned back from the mountains and gave me a little nod of... respect? "I must say, that leap was quite the impressive display. Taking arrows for a pony who professionally takes arrows is of course *violently* stupid, but that doesn't make your actions any less valiant. I admit, it was

an act of courage and decency I did not expect. Though that reminds me..." a small velvet pouch appeared over her head. There was barely a flicker from her horn. "Honored Fire, will you accept a five bit chunk of amethyst in lieu of currency?"

The dragon smiled, easily, "Certainly Aurora my dear... To be honest I'm feeling a bit peckish after such a long range fire warp."

Lights smiled. It actually seemed more... natural than the smiles I'd seen before. For a moment she was twenty years younger.

She magically plucked a small purple stone from the little bag, "Catch." She said, hurling the gem to the dragon's mouth. He caught it deftly on a tongue at least three times my size and rolled it around in his mouth like a connoisseur. "Ah, plenty of iron in this one, my compliments to the chef."

I blinked. *Dragons eat gemstones?* I suddenly felt less guilty about the lavish, castle catered breakfast I'd thrown up.

Aurora smiled that real smile again. "Thank you," the little bag vanished and she turned back to me, donning a more serious expression. "As to your question, thanks to the Honored Fire's generous donations, I have plenty of bottles stored in the dragon-fire place in my stockroom and I'd hoped to catch whoever I missed on a second swing. Heart proved more... evasively resourceful than I anticipated. That blade of his..." I caught then tiniest nervous twitch from her fore-hoof.

She regained her composure so fast I wasn't even sure she'd lost it. "In any case, had he been captured he would have jumped at the opportunity to serve Celestia and annoy his father at the same time. It's a pity we lost him really, our ruse would have benefitted from a sworn royal guardsman confirming my emotional instability. Oh well."

I raised an eyebrow. "Wait, what's up with Heart and his father?"

The Archmagus shook her head. "Sorry, I'm no palace gossip, it's just a personal thing and it's not my story to tell."

Twenty Three

“Okay, but you’re going to tell *me* right.”

Celestia paused her story and gently lowered the teapot representing the dragon. “Well, given how much time has past and the liberties I’ve already taken, I suppose I could...”

I smiled. “Marvelous, so what happened between Heart and his father?”

Celestia raised her head in an enigmatically thoughtful sort of way, revealing the utterly shameful job her attendants had done under her chin. I swear, some ponies shouldn’t be allowed to hold curries! I felt her pain too, Top Hat could never get that spot right. Every morning I had to clean it *myself*! Not to mention-

“Hmm...” Celestia muttered, distracting me from my lofty train of thought. “I think I should wait to tell you that story until the point where Heart told it to your ancestor.”

“What? Why”

“Well because then I’ll be able to tell you the rather important story of how Blueblood the First heard Heart’s story.”

“Wait, so you’re going to tell me a story about someone else telling a story? Why wouldn’t you just tell the story?”

The Princess took another draught of tea. “Blueblood, sometimes how and when a story is told is just as important as the story itself.”

I groaned, “Oh *fine* then, carry on.”

One

“Wait, if you wanted to catch both of us and we were in an enclosed space anyway, why didn’t you just use enough fire for-”

“Okay, *look*” she said, crossing her fore-hooves. “I already asked you to keep questions to a minimum here! I’d love to rattle off all the details of my schemes like some comic book villain, but we simply don’t have time. I ask again, can you *please* cut the questions so we can get to what we can do for you.”

I crossed my fore-hooves right back. “Not until you answer the 50 million bit question.”

Lights narrowed her eyes, “Which is?”

“Why do you think *I’m* going to accept any of your poison candy when I know you have ulterior motives and the cavalry is on its way?”

The ghost of a smirk crept onto her face, it was... disturbing. “Because, if you want to survive in Everfree, you’ll need resources and friends; both of which I can provide.”

That said she fluttered up to the dragon’s head and made a sweeping bow. “Honored Fire, if you would be so kind as to explain the details?”

I looked up at the scaly leviathan keeping me airborne and tried to take in a few more details (you know, other than “*holy !@# \$ it’s a dragon*”). He was mostly purple in coloration with light green scales spread along his underside and darker green blades running down his elongated neck. He was huge of course, at least 20 pony lengths, and heavily muscled to boot.

He carried himself with an air of confidence that his body more than backed up... but there were a few discolored scales speckled amongst the purple and he had a sort of softly worn look that made him somewhat less intimidating than one might expect. If I had to hazard a guess I’d have placed him somewhere in his late sixties (or whatever the equivalent in dragon years was). He was wearing a fairly mellow expression for someone who had just violated international law.

He smiled down on me with a look of incredible warmth, “Fear not, little one. You are far from the first pony I’ve carried...” He grimaced, “Actually, I must apologize for the fall. I fear the distance was far and that fire wasn’t very... fresh.”

I was about to ask what the hay that meant when he flipped me around and carefully intertwined his massive claws, forming a little platform with his claws surrounding it like a railing.

I stood up, for the very first time since my spontaneous combustion.

My legs were a little shaky, but I managed a polite bow. "It's totally cool man, I mean you saved my life... uh... Mister Fire?"

The Dragon chuckled, "Actually my given name is Crest; I'm just the "Fire of Agriculture""

I sort of looked back and forth for a second, just in case the explanation for that was written in the clouds or something. "Uhh... okay I can't say I have a lot of experience in the fields, but I don't think blueberry bushes grow too well when they're incinerating."

He chuckled. "Fire is merely a title in Pyria, I believe you might call me a "Minister", or "Secretary". I'm in charge of filling our nation's granaries; we can't afford to eat only gems you see."

"Oh..." I shuffled awkwardly in his palms. I usually wasn't this bashful around authority figures (to a fault), but talking to this guy felt a bit like talking to my grandfather... Old gods rest his soul.

I shook myself, "Sorry, the title makes a lot more sense."

"It's perfectly alright good Prince. And for the record, I shall happily trade you the right to call me Crest, for the right to call you Blueblood." He tilted his head thoughtfully, "I must admit, I find your professed ignorance of agricultural matters a bit surprising given your profession... and cutie mark."

I looked to the hammer and sickle on my flank and shrugged. "Yeah... I can't really tell you what's up with that, I got it while making a speech and no one's made heads or tails of it since."

I turned back to him, "Actually... you're kind of right though. I mean organizing my band of merry farmers has taught me a *few* things, but when you work with ponies who have spent their whole lives in fields and orchards you really start to realize just how ignorant you are."

Crest nodded sagely. "You are wise beyond your years good prince and I understand you entirely. In my position I have to keep far abreast of our growers, but with all of these new cultivars and ecological theories-"

"*Ahem*" Aurora cleared her throat, She floated her glasses off and produced a cloth to rub them. "I'm truly sorry to interrupt these pleasantries. Really, I am. But the Cloudsdale guard may be here any minute. If we could return to the matter at hand?"

The dragon smirked and bowed slightly, it was an odd movement in the air. "Quite right, my apologies good prince, we old men do tend to ramble."

I smiled. "Call me Blueblood."

His face lit up, "Very well then, are you perhaps familiar with night soil?"

I raised an eyebrow "You mean manure left without proper treatment? Well... Yeah, I'm pretty familiar with it considering the lack of decent sewer systems in most earth pony villages. My friend Wind has been trying to organize some better cleanup crews, why?"

The dragon let out a long, hot sigh. From my end it felt a bit like a warm breeze on a sticky day. "Thank you so much for being unabashed about it. You have no idea how hard it is to get most dragons to even mention droppings."

His expression darkened for a moment. "I'm sure you've also heard of its use as fertilizer?"

I grimaced. "Yeah... it's a really great way to turn a starving village into a diseased one."

I remembered more than a few towns where I'd seen that. Whenever I bumped into one desperate enough to use it, I tried to get everypony to wash their food, but in villages the pegasi were draining dry, they just couldn't afford the clean water. Rigorous cooking worked sometimes, but it only took one pony to forget, or not stew their apples for long enough and... You get the picture.

Sometimes I called in Wind for those villages, but a doctor can only do so much without supplies...

The fire nodded, "I know what you're thinking Blueblood, I have seen it too. Right now its use is a blight on both our nations... but it doesn't have to be."

I found my footing and looked the Dragon right in the eye "You have my attention."

The Dragon nodded and began, "The droppings of one species are far less likely to carry diseases capable of infecting members of a greatly dissimilar species, simply because they survive in different habitats and have different microbes adapted their differing bodies. I have the names of some fifty fast flying Pyrian carters who'd be interested in exchanging gold or dung of their own for the dung that gets accumulated in earth pony villages. With the approval of your government and a relaxing of both side's tariffs we could pump a massive amount of wealth into both our nations and the earth ponies would have another business in their hooves."

I winced. It was a good plan, it was such a good plan that I'd already tried it.

"Crest, thank you so much for bringing this to me, but..." I sighed and shook my head. "It won't work. Another union leader named Empire and I coordinated on a similar project a few years back with the cows, but food borne illness was still pretty rampant if the manure wasn't properly treated. Its good in theory, but in practice..."

He smiled so hard he showed teeth. "You forget one very important thing Prince Blueblood."

I blinked. "What?"

"Dragons breathe fire."

"Uh... okay..."

"You don't understand Blueblood, it is childishly easy for dragons to "sterilize" their droppings by flaming them and easy to tell if they've been "cooked through" just by checking them for moisture. That kind of cleaning is not nearly as helpful for dragons, we have such high body temperatures

in certain organs that many microbes adapted to infect us are immune to all but the most blazing of heat, but it's an excellent way to purge any microbes that would thrive in the temperatures of a pony body. Similarly, it would be easy for the carters to flame earth pony manure. Any infectious organisms in it are unlikely to be able to survive at dragon fire temperatures and infectious extremophiles that can survive at the temperatures of draconic fire bladders would be very unlikely to be present in the first place.

"I know it sounds a bit... theoretical, but I've made inquiries with health professionals on my end and they think the trade will be safe. It could bring money into both our economies and make our fields bloom. It's, it's...." His face grew very still. "It's a chance for something decent to happen. I think the poor souls in Season's slums need that."

I blinked. Wait. He actually sounded sincere. Of all creatures, a *dragon minister* was an earth pony sympathizer? Where did these ponies... people keep coming from?

I was struck even less coherent than usual. "I... thanks. Seriously, just thanks for *noticing*. I didn't think..."

"...that dragons would be interested in the plight of the small folk?" He finished for me.

I looked away. I couldn't meet his eyes.

He shook his head. "We may be firey, powerful creatures with age, but everyone forgets that we dragons spend perhaps a century of our lives no larger than you, and only the most powerful of us are gifted with fire so early. The years have dulled many of my memories, but I will never forget what it's like to stand in front of some towering monster and feel powerless and alone... Also" He smirked, it looked good on him. "I've seen six centuries. Trust me, the little people never stay little."

I smiled. Then I turned to the floating archmagus. "Okay, that'll do. You have yourself a bucking deal Lights. Keep people like this coming my way and you'll have a pardo- *urk*"

Crests claws tightened around me and I heard a loud choking gasp.... It wasn't coming from me.

I swung my head around and caught sight of the dragon desperately trying to breathe. There were lines of pain on his face and his throat looked frighteningly swollen.

The muscles in the claw wrapped around me tensed as he squeezed in an involuntary spasm of pain. I heard something crack and shrieked in agony. Out of the corner of my eye I caught Aurora's expression...

Old gods, she was *scared*.

Crest noticed what he was doing to me and snapped open his claw so I wouldn't be crushed. His slick scales started to slide out from under me, but I managed to scrabble my foreleg around one of his talons and latch on. The old dragon jerked and waved his limbs around gracelessly, swinging me back and forth as my heart pounded and I gripped for dear life.

A tiny part of me was extremely grateful that my stomach was empty.

For what felt like hours I couldn't tell up from down and the wind whipped around me in every direction, but finally I saw the terrible truth.

With all the convulsions, Crest wasn't flapping anymore. And the trees were getting bigger.

MOTHER BUCKING, HORN RAPING, PIECE OF-

A purple glow surrounded us, the dragon stilled. Suddenly the world was sane. I blinked the windblown tears from eyes and flung my head around in search of an explanation.

Eventually Aurora flapped desperately to keep herself stable as her horn glowed with several layers of purple magical force. She was actually keeping us airborne with sheer telekinetic power.

My eyes went wide. We had to weigh a hundred tons at least. *Sweet mother of horse apples...* I guess you didn't become archmagus by collecting box tops.

Then her horn sputtered, just for a split second, and we dropped some fifty feet. I barely managed to cling to Crest. He still couldn't breathe, much less tell us what was wrong with him. His lips were turning blue.

Aurora was visibly panting. Strain was written all over her face and little magic sparks were shooting off from her glowing horn as the effort wore at her magic.

She wasn't going to last long.

Think Blueblood think! If I jumped off... No I was an afterthought for Aurora. Maybe I could ask her to drop him and keep me... Damnit I couldn't let him die! But we would both die if he didn't stop cho-

It hit me. "AURORA! HEIMLICH! NOW!"

The Magus grunted in pain, "WHAT IN THE NAME OF SWEATY DRAGON BALLS ARE- Oh."

She dropped us. For a few bowel destroying moments we flailed about in freefall. Then a purple explosion of force rammed Crest in the chest and his mouth erupted in a maelstrom of blinding fire that singed the very clouds.

There was a long pause as the ashes settled.

When I finally worked up the courage to extract my quivering face from between my forelegs I noticed that I wasn't incinerated. Also Crest was flapping his wings again. *Holy Horeshoes, I might just live through this.*

Yay...

I turned my aching neck to check on Aurora and staring stunned at a deep blue filly still too young for her cutie mark, hovering right where the firestorm had centered.

Then I blinked away some soot and realized it was an *Alicorn* filly.

My mind blanked. "Buwa?"

Truly my years as a rabble rousing union leader had made me a master wordsmith.

Once the initial shock had passed, Aurora zoomed over with a look of utter terror in her eyes and examined the little filly from top to bottom.

Finding her unharmed, her expression went very cold. She put her hooves on the Alicorn's shoulders. "Luna, what exactly were you doing in my reagent stocks? The office door was locked for a reason! I did not teach you to teleport through walls so you could rifle through some of the most dangerous magic in existence!"

The second princess of Equestria, heir to the throne, and sister to a literal sun goddess, cringed and let out a whimper. "I-I was just trying to find you and... you weren't there so..."

"Luna I told you explicitly, lessons were canceled for today due to council meetings. I was down at work with your sister! I certainly wasn't hiding in the dragon fire!"

"Dragon fire? Bu-but I didn't know it was dra-"

"No buts!" She cut her off, "There is no possible excuse for breaking into my office and fooling around with potentially lethal magic. And of course you didn't know, I haven't even shown you what the things in that section *are*. That's why you shouldn't be playing with them!" She looked the filly right in the eye. "What was the first thing I taught you? The very first thing!?"

The little filly bit her lip. "M-magic is not a toy..."

Aurora shook her head. There was a moment of silence as Aurora's wing flaps slowed and the wind calmed. "I am unbelievably disappointed in you right now..." She pointed a commanding hoof towards Crest and I. "Now, go and apologize to the poor people you nearly *killed*."

Luna nodded and flapped towards us, utterly silent.

All through this conversation, I was hanging from a frighteningly sharp claw while the honored fire's tongue lolled out and he wheezed for breath.

The filly flew up to Crest's head and hovered just over his snout. She couldn't quite manage to look him in the eye. "I'm sorry I put you in danger Honored Fire."

The dragon turned from the filly for a moment and coughed up a small cloud of black soot. "Apology accepted my Dear Princess, the dragons of Pyria treasure your visits... Though I would take it as a personal

favor if you would send a letter ahead... and perhaps not use quite so much fire."

She winced. "I'm really sorry Crest, I didn't know- I mean didn't want to hurt..."

Crest gave her a reassuring look. "Rest easy Princess, there's strength in these old bones yet... I'm afraid our good prince must have taken the... oh dear."

My thankfully empty stomach lurched again as I was rapidly shifted back into the Fire's cupped claws.

"My apologies Blueblood! I did not mean to leave you in such an uncomfortable position."

"It's cool." I croaked. I twisted my neck experimentally and heard a sickening pop... ow...

The little filly fluttered down to me. "I'm sorry I put your life in danger mister..." She glanced up. "W-wait, who are you?"

I put a hoof to my chin. It was a good question "Well... First I was a cheerleader, then I was a fake lawyer, then I was a union stallion... and now I'm a prince." I blinked in realization. "And, come to think of it, your brother slash nephew-ish pony... Hi."

She put an ear back in confusion. "*You're* the new prince? You?"

I chuckled, "Yeah, I know, not much to look at, am I? I swear I'm a little more presentable when I'm not so sooty and vomity... It's kind of been an off day."

There was a pause. Crickets chirped below us.

Finally I raised a leg. "So... brohoof?"

She looked at me like I'd grown a fifth hoof and hesitantly touched a hoof to mine. We held that position and sort of... stared for a while. "This... is awkward." She said.

"Eh," I shrugged, "it's better than when I met Celestia, fewer note cards."

She gave me the tiniest smile, it looked really, really good on her.

Then Lights floated down like some butterfly avatar of adulthood and it faded away. "We have to go," Came the archmagus, "the tower's been incompetent enough already with their tracking and we just used up all our spare time." She turned to Luna. "You used the fire on the left correct?"

The filly nodded.

The archmagus turned her back to her and looked up at Crest. "Honored Fire, can you send us back through the spare burner? I think I'm a little low on power for a multiparty teleport."

He nodded. "Of course." He turned his head to me. "Please good prince, keep in touch. I feel we'll have much to talk about in the coming months and my digestive tract is always open..." he paused and looked away. "That... came out wrong."

"It's okay," I said, "it's been a pretty long day. Send me the details of your plan. I'll send word to Wind so she can look it over, she'd know more about our end of the issue than anyone else."

Crest smiled. "We may have taken the first step to a great good today Blueblood. Remember that and take heart." To my surprise, he turned to the archmagus. "That goes double for you Miss Lights."

She looked up at him, for just one more moment the mask came off and her eyes misted. "Thank you."

The dragon shook his head, "I owe you more than a thousand lives Aurora, this is nothing."

She looked back to the horizon, her eyes hard once more. "We have to go. Are all of you ready?"

Luna and I exchanged a nod. "Yeah, we're good."

She turned to Crest. "Burn us."

One

I dry heaved at the floor as sweat beaded down my face. *Letters, next time I'm sending letters.*

We had reformed from emebers in the open closet of a moderately spacious office (Well, it would have been spacious if it wasn't packed with papers and strange little jars filled with old gods knew what). A large, perfectly ordinary looking fireplace flickered behind us and I could see a second, empty one in another closet across the room. Clearly the archmagus kept good stocks.

A very groggy Aurora nudged Luna's neck. "Run along now, go find Heart and tell him we're waiting up here. We'll discuss the consequences of your break in later."

Luna nodded and scampered off. She looked pretty desperate to escape Aurora's disapproving gaze. When she was gone, I offered the tired unicorn a shoulder to lean on and she gladly accepted. Both of us were far too tired to care about the propriety or what not.

"You think... maybe you were too hard on your student?"

Aurora shook her head. "Luna is a goddess just as much as her sister. If she doesn't learn to respect her power it *will* destroy her." She looked at the cold stone floor. "I've known her since the day she was foaled. I assure you, I take no pleasure in doling out punishment."

I nodded. There was a long pause as I tried to think of a decent way to do what I needed to do. I came up blank.

"I need to know your ulterior motive." I said.

Lights chuckled. "It wouldn't be very ulterior then now would it?"

I shook my head. "Let me put it this way... if you don't tell me exactly what you're getting out of this arrangement, I'm going to tell heart to press charges and leave you to rot in a dungeon"

The unicorn narrowed her eyes. "That wasn't our deal."

"I promised you a pardon Archmagus," I gave her a look icier than she could ever hope to achieve. "I didn't say when."

She replied very calmly. "That's complete bullshit... what's really interesting is that you know it." She slid off my shoulder and turned around to face me. "I suppose you also realize that lacking that excuse, you're just breaking a promise and threatening somepony for information." She stepped gracefully through the neat piles of papers and stood behind her desk. "That does not bode well for your precious innocence, Organizer."

I flinched. I wanted to apologize. I wanted to just take the deal, trust her and...

No.

I locked eyes with her. "I'm sorry Aurora. I really am, but I can't deal with you if I don't know what I'm getting into. Not when I know you're playing another game and lives could be at stake." I felt my fore-hoof start to shake. I forced it still. "Please don't make me do something we'll both regret."

For a long time the only sound in the room was the crackle of dragon fire.

Finally Aurora floated out a key and unlocked a drawer in her desk. "Tell me Blueblood, are you familiar with the massacre at Saddle Point?"

A flash, three years ago, a mining town, five ponies dead... burnt to charred bones by fire magic, one a colt younger than Luna. More were wounded with severe burns, Wind was there, patching ponies up with a little aloe she'd gathered. I was picking through the charred husks of buildings looking for family treasures...

All because they wanted three bits more per cart of coal.

We weren't there in time to stop it.

I looked down, "I'm afraid I missed that crackdown."

The archmagus levitated out a file. "I didn't."

My heart skipped a beat. "What?"

Aurora poured out the file and five sketches fell on her desk with paragraph long descriptions. Five little ponies reduced to dust and paperwork.

She looked up. "I assure you, *Prince*, I'm helping earth ponies for entirely selfish reasons.

"You see, I really want some sleep."

One

One capture, a refusal to press charges, check-in with Celestia and walk out of earshot through those oh so wonderfully cozy hallways (seriously I think the unicorns who built this place wanted to stop pegasi from spreading their wings or something) later, Heart stopped me with a wing.

"We need to talk."

I rubbed a hoof between my eyes. "Look man, whatever it is, can it wait? I've had a really, really long day."

"Just so long as we get something straight." He reached out a hoof and bodily spun me to face him, "If you keep trying to take hits for me we're going to have a problem."

I narrowed my eyes. "Really? You're *seriously* giving me a dressing down for trying to save your life?"

He gritted his teeth. "Look pretty boy, I get that your new to palace life, but let me fill you in. When you interfere with royal guard work, you interfere with the royal guard. That means the best line of defense this castle has goes down and ponies get hurt. Ponies *die*. I'm not going to let that happen just because you want to play knight in shining armor."

I swear, this guy was the most irritating pony I'd ever met. And I'd met frigging Empire.

"I'm so very sorry." I said, "I didn't realize that bursting into flames was one of the vital duties of our military."

“Uh, when we’re acting as body guards yeah, it really is! Also,” he raised a hoof and tapped pointedly at his breastplate. “you may not have noticed, but I was wearing bucking *body armor* while your protection consisted of a cheap suit and a thick layer of insufferable arrogance!”

I gasped, “Wow! You’re right! Being covered in conductive metal plates would make completely you impervious to burning *fire*! I don’t know how I could have missed it.”

“The armor’s enchanted you bucking... jerk. Maybe you shouldn’t be running off half cocked when you don’t know what you’re dealing with!”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh I’m sorry I’ll just assume from now on that everything in this stupid castle is mag-”

I froze. All the little pieces clicked into place and a wave of terror ran down my spine. *Oh... Oh BUCK!*

I grabbed Heart by the shoulders “Luna! Where’s Luna?”

To my surprise he snapped to attention “Her room, North tower. What’s the problem and how do I make it bleed?”

“I’ll explain on the way, C’mon!” I turned tail and bolted north. A professional knight in shining armor was right at my heels.

#

Twenty Three

Celestia hung her head and looked down at her empty, stained teacup. I’ll admit it was a horrible sight, but nothing a good servant’s washing couldn’t fix. I opened my mouth to say as much so she could get back to the story... but then I stopped. I had the strangest sensation. For a moment it felt like I wasn’t looking at the teacup, or her glorious coat or even her regal crown, I was looking at *her*.

She looked tired... and not from lack of sleep.

I thought very, very hard, trying to find a comparable expression, but I’d only ever seen one other pony that tired.

It was when my mother dragged me in front of great grandmother Blueblood's deathbed. I complained that it was sunny out and we could go do other less depressing things. The ancient mare just looked at me... I almost want to say how Luna looked at me this morning, but that's not right. It was similar, but there was more... Like she'd tried very hard to do something, and it hadn't worked.

Mother took me out of the room, told me that a prince had to learn when to not tell the truth, and then took me out to the park.

For some reason I didn't feel like playing.

"I should have known..." The Princess said finally, bringing me back to the present. "I know I didn't see what he saw, but I shouldn't have *needed* to. I just should have known. I had a duty. Not as a princess, but a sister... and I failed."

"Known what!?" I shouted. Damnit I needed more of the story, this was something important, I... I just knew it. "What should you have known? What did my ancestor know? Did he miss something magically important? What?"

Princess Celestia shook her head. "Just the opposite, actually."

"Well, what!? Spit it out already!"

She let out a breath. The clock ticked away behind us.

"Blueblood, think about it. If Luna didn't know that fireplace was full of dragon fire, why would she jump in?"

Chapter 4

Twenty Three

Tick, tick, tick...

The clock was the only sound in the room.

I kept trying to picture the sort of situation that would make the co-ruler of Equestria feel so desperate and hopeless, but I kept drawing a blank. I tried to think back to our brief meeting. I wracked my brain to see if I could get some insight into her character that would shed some light on... this.

But all I could seem to think about was her glaring down at me, crying.

It's not nice to make people cry.

I felt the strangest wrenching sensation in my chest. I broke out in a sweat.

"S-so..." I choked, desperate for a distraction. "Obviously she lived, and everything turned out okay, so how did they make her not want to... um...?"

Celestia smiled just a little. I swear I saw the tiniest tint of blush; the real kind, not the cosmetic. Oh dear, Celestia wearing blush, I cringed at the thought. Though maybe if she got a good cosmetologist...

"Well," The Princess began, interrupting my train of thought once more. "Your ancestor had a plan... sort of."

#

One

I stood outside the ornate door tapping my hoof. Damn it, where was Heart!?

Finally the Guardsman puffed his way down the hall. His saddlebags were full to the brim.

“Did you get everything?” I asked.

He shook his head, he was sweaty from the run and he looked afraid “No! I couldn’t find Celestia, She’s in some late night meeting. Are you sure we shouldn’t send for the Archmagus?”

I nodded. I undid the straps on his flanks and shrugged on the bags, my ribs protested, but I hushed them. “I’ve only known Aurora for *hours* and I still know she wouldn’t be good for this.” Actually come to think of it, I only had known her for hours. I hesitated. “Do you think she would?”

He paled, an impressive feat for a white stallion. “Old gods, no.”

I gulped. I’ll admit it, I’d been holding out hope for more backup.

“Nervous?” He asked.

My ear twitched. “Nope. You?”

He smiled a little too wide.

I let out a breath. “Alright then... Let’s do this!”

We whirled on the door and put on our game faces. Heart flung out his hoof and turned the knob with a practiced flick. The door swung free. The guard leapt in and I slid right behind him. I slammed the portal shut with a crack of my hooves and we spun to face our challenge!

Which... happened to be a 10 year old, blue filly lying on her bed with a book who’s response to our dramatic entrance was to stare at us blankly.

I rustled through a saddlebag with my nose and produced a carefully wrapped ice cream bar. “Fwe broghf snahks!”

“Luna-I-love-you,-please-don’t-kill-yourself!” The Pegasus guardsman blurted.

Luna froze. My mouth fell open and the sundae hit the carpet.

Heart bit his lip. “Uh your majesty, I didn’t- I mean I did, but... umm...” he looked down. “I said the right thing, but the words were wrong...”

Lacking a better option, I pulled out a candy bar and plopped it sheepishly in my hoof. “So... uh, chocolate?”

The Heir to the throne did not take my fudgerific candy bar. She also didn’t move. Or breathe. There was a long, long silence.

Finally she spoke. “P-please don’t tell Celestia.”

Another pause. Heart tensed and we exchanged a look. Eventually, I forced one hoof in front of the other and made my way to her, I dropped the chocolate. “Look, we can worry about stuff like that later. Right now... we just need to make sure you’re okay.”

Heart walked up and put a hoof on her shoulder. In a way he looked more scared than her. Luna looked down and touched a hoof to his.

More silence... This was getting ridiculous.

Finally I let out a breath and spoke. “Okay... Normally if you were feeling down, I’d ask if you wanted to talk about it, but under the circumstances we really need to know what’s wrong and how we can help.”

The princess let out a breath. “It’s just...” she flicked her eyes to me and I caught a shred of fear and distrust in her eyes worthy of her teacher. “M-maybe I shouldn’t.”

I winced. It was a horrible thing to see in the eyes of a pony so small. “I get that this place really, really makes it hard to trust ponies. I can even get why you wouldn’t want to drag your sister into this, but suffering in silence is not healthy. I can tell you from *experience*. You’ve got to talk to somepony, and you could do a lot worse than your sworn guardsman and your brother.”

She narrowed her eyes. “*Celestia* asked for a brother. Not me.”

I blinked. It took a moment for the implications to sink in.

If I was going to be honest, really honest. The girl had a point. She was not Celestia. She hadn't asked for me to pull up a cushion listen to her deepest, darkest secrets. Heart might have earned the right to hold her while she cried, but I hadn't.

And then I had an idea. A silly little smirk crept up my face, "Want one?" I asked

She blinked. "What?"

"Look," I said, "I get it. I got a seat at the family table for all sorts of crazy weird political reasons, not because everyone thought I'd be fun to hang around with. I get it, I really do, but... why not both?"

She looked back and forth for a moment. "Wait, are you um... applying... for my friendship?"

I clapped my forehooves together. "Yes! Or, you know siblinghood! 'cause that's what's going on legally anyway." I put a hoof to my chin. "You know, actually applying sounds too business-ish, why don't we go old fashioned." I held up a hoof solemnly. "Guardman Heart, if you'd be so kind as to observe."

The warrior in question shot me a very distinct look of "*What the hay are you doing?*"

I gave my best smile of "*Improvising*".

He reluctantly removed himself from Luna and stood at attention. The pinched eyebrows of "*This had better be good...*" had never been more clearly expressed.

I raised my head and took up an elevated stance "I hearby swear that from this day forward that I, Prince Blueblood the First shall faithfully perform all duties of brotherhood to the Royal Princess Luna of Equestria. These duties shall include, but not be limited to: loving her endlessly (in a platonic familial fashion), being there for her whenever the horse apples hit the furnace, sending out winter wrap-up gifts and occasionally being as annoying as ponily possible!" I gave her a level look. "Will you accept my oath?"

She blinked. She looked at me like I was some sort of impossible Calculus problem. "Okay, you *can't* be serious. Why would you possibly want to make that promise? You have every reason to hate my guts!" She put her hooves on my shoulders. "Seriously I'm worthless! Like ten minutes ago I nearly killed you! And mom..." she took her hooves off and lowered her head.

I raised an eyebrow. "Okay, firstly; I'm amending the previous oath with an 'incessantly remind you that you are not worthless clause'. Secondly, I'm making this promise because... because..."

Why? Came a voice from the back of my head. For a moment I didn't have an answer. Then another voice drifted in "*does not bode well for your precious innocence...*"

"I... I really need keep a promise right now." I said. "I could do a lot worse than promising to be a decent sibling. I mean, like it or not, at this point I have to be some kind of sibling. I might as well be a good one."

There was a pause. Luna screwed her eyes shut. I could almost feel the weight of her train of thought. She had no reason to trust me, no reason to believe I cared about her...

Finally she spoke. "Could... could I get it without the "annoying as ponily possible" part?" she asked.

I fell instantly in love.

A big, goofy grin spread across my face. "Sorry, it's a package deal."

She snorted. "Okay then."

She held out a hoof, I pressed mine to it. It didn't feel quite so awkward anymore. There wasn't so much a silence this time as a quiet. A long, relieving quiet... of course we weren't done.

I let out a breath. "So... you still haven't told us what the problem was."

She looked away, but she pressed her hoof tighter. "It's just... well Mom's gone, and Warm Breeze is gone, and Celestia is off being a ruler and I just kind of felt, well... alone." Her head slumped.

I glanced to Heart, then caught a glimpse of a mirror.

I smiled. "Allow me to explain why you are a silly pony."

One

One explanation, chocolaty picnic, and request for a nap later, Heart and I were trotting back down the hall.

"You know," He said, "If you break that filly's heart, I *will* break your everything."

I kept walking. "You're a good pony."

"I try."

Twenty Three

For some reason I was smiling. *She liked him!* I nodded to Celestia. "Okay... I suppose that explains..."

I thought back to the tears... My smile fell. Whatever they were, they weren't tears of joy.

"...very little actually." This story was starting to get truly inscrutable. I stifled a yawn and poured myself more tea.

Tick, tick, tick...

"I can see how she would have wanted to hug him if they had a close relationship, but why the tears? Did seeing an old friend bring back memories of troubled times? Was there something terrible she had to tell him? Did she..."

Celestia was staring, is swear *staring*. It was most unseemly. I was disappointed actually; she'd seemed far more stately when this conversation started.

She didn't stop. I narrowed my eyes, "What?"

She blinked and looked away. "Oh! It's nothing, nothing at all. Please, go on, keep thinking."

"Oh, all right then. Well he might have-" I stopped. "actually come to think of it this is a rather pointless inquiry. I can just ask you..."

Celestia sighed. She had bags under her eyes.

I groaned, "Oh for pity's sake, stop it!"

"Stop what?"

"Stop making your disappointed 'Blueblood just did something stupid' look. Seriously asking you for information isn't *dumb*. It's efficient! There's no reason to speculate about something if someone smarter than you can just tell you the answer."

She calmly levitated up a handkerchief and rubbed gently at her eye. "Sometimes thinking is fun." She tilted her head. "You don't think you're smart?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but... for a long moment I didn't know what to say. *Am I smart?*

Finally I shook myself and regained my composure. "Of course I'm smart! I must have forty college credits by now! It's just... you're you and... Uhg! That's not important! The point is there are plenty of things to be disappointed in me for and this is not one of them!"

The sun goddess blinked. "I'm sorry, could you repeat that?"

I slammed my fore-hoof on the floor, "Story! What made Luna cry?!"

She opened her mouth... then closed it. She let out a breath. "Very well, I'll tell you, but first you need to know about a few more ponies... people actually; starting with Wind."

"Who?"

"She was another Union leader."

"Did she do something important?"

"You might say that."

One

“Blueblood!”

Wind bowled me over and wrapped her hooves around my neck. Her grip would have put crest to shame. She shoved my nose into her sweaty orange vest and held on tight. It was the best thing I’d ever smelled.

Seriously, a little pony in my head was jumping up and down going “Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!...” I never wanted her to let go... but oxygen was becoming an issue.

“*gurk!” I choked.

“Oh!” She let go. “S-sorry, it’s just when the royal guard got you... Blueblood I thought you were dead!”

I smiled. “Please, I’m too pretty to die.”

She snorted. Her curly red mane jumbled over her warm purple fur. “The stallions of the world rejoice.”

I grinned. She was actually here! We could work together and we could make Crest’s trade happen and we could... I caught a whiff of her breath.

My face fell. Wind smiled sheepishly and looked away.

I held out a foreleg.

Slowly, very slowly she reached a hoof into the pocket of her vest and produced a hip flask. To her credit, she put it in my hoof. “Okay, three things: one, you were dead, two, I just flew over here, *flew*, three...” she hesitated, “...the pain’s been coming back.”

My eyes went wide. “What?!”

She held up a hoof. “Muscle pain! No bone okay, I had it checked, it’s minor.”

I relaxed at that, a little. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. "Again, I think you should..."

She groaned, "Yeah, yeah, use willow bark, I know. And again back; it's more expensive than gold and my patients need it."

I smiled, it was a bit grim, but it was a smile nonetheless. "It's good to have you back."

She smirked, "Likewise Blondy, now let's see this sister of yours."

I blushed. "Actually I kind of have two." I led her down the hall and filled her in on everything that had happened so far, my bizarre adoption, the council meetings, Aurora and Crest... well almost everything. I cherry picked a few painful details out of the meeting with Luna. I could tell she knew I was holding something back, but she didn't press.

"So..." I said, dreading the news. "Who's farming again?"

She looked down and rubbed a hoof at her vest. "My stitchers got back to work, your gang too... Empire's though." She shook her head. "He thought that deal was too good to be true. To be fair I can't really blame him." She stopped for a moment and smirked, "Plus he still doesn't like you." She wiggled an eyebrow.

I winced. Seriously, you pick up one guy, *once*. "Well at least he's not getting violent, right?"

The smirk went away. She shook her head again, "Don't count on that lasting. He's still stockpiling, and don't forget, he has most of the vets. If we don't calm him down... I don't even know what's going to happen."

"You mean aside from lots of ponies dying?"

"Yeah."

For a long time the only sound was our hooves on the stone.

"Look," I said, finally, "things are tense yeah, but... we've got a real shot here okay. I know it's crazy, but I think Celestia will keep her word. Things suck, but they suck a lot less than usual. Or, something like that."

She snorted. "Yeah, maybe we should throw a party or something."

I tilted my head thoughtfully, “Probably, but first we need to talk about poo.”

“Why do I hang out with you again?”

Before I could explain in excruciating detail exactly how awesome I was, a certain armored Pegasus huffed up behind us carrying a gigantic burlap sack in his teeth. It looked like it was about to explode.

I gave Wind a questioning look.

She held up her hooves, ruffling her vest. “Hey! I needed to make sure no one knicked the medical supplies... Plus he said one bag.”

I swear, I thought Heart was going to literally sprout daggers from his eyeballs and fling them at her.

Fortunately we were ten feet from the door.

“Heart put that down man, Celestia can teleport it somewhere safe while we talk.”

The exhausted guardsman plopped it down instantly. He wheezed out through his teeth like he was trying to suppress a pant.

Wind tilted her head. “Wait, the princess can teleport all of that?”

I nodded. “This is the girl who raises the sun every morning okay? Literally. She can take anything.”

That said I swung the door open and saw our sun goddess sprawled on the ground. She wasn’t breathing.

One

I froze.

Celestia... oh buck it, my little sister was dead. I had spent my time in Everfree Castle surrounded by creatures who could fly and teleport and move heavenly bodies without breaking a sweat. Never once had I felt weaker. I just *froze*.

Wind didn't.

She wheeled on Heart and snapped her hoof towards the heaping sack in the hall. "Green bag. Red cross. Get it. *Now.*"

Heart lunged for the bag. Wind spun around and smacked me upside the head. "You. Compressions. Yesterday."

The pain snapped me out of it and weeks of half remembered training flooded back into my mind. I stumbled over to Celestia and rolled her on her side while Wind put her cheek to her neck and lifted the filly's head into position.

I started compressions, jabbing my hooves into her side again and again. Wind wrapped her hooves around Celestia's muzzle, clamped her lips closed and covered one of her nostrils, she took a deep breath. After the right count of compressions she wrapped put her mouth to Celestia's nose and blew for all she was worth.

Nothing happened.

She came up for air. "Switch places!" She wheezed.

"What?!"

She growled, "I need my hooves and my voice. Now switch bucking places!"

I wrapped my hooves around the filly's neck and let wind take my place. Three breaths and 500 years later Heart came back with the bag.

Wind snatched it with a hoof. "Back to compressions! She needs them more than air!"

I returned to her chest. I pounded so hard I felt ribs crack. *Buck!*

"Wind I think I'm hurting her!"

She tore the bag open and a pile of bottles scattered on the floor. "Good! That means you're pressing hard enough. Now *keep up!*"

Heart's eyes flicked back and forth and sweat poured down his back. "What do I do? What do I do? Do I breathe for her, do I sound the alarm?"

Wind snatched a bottle in her teeth and flung it in the air. "YOU BUCKING CLEAR!!"

For just a second, just the tiniest fraction of an instant time froze. *Oh. Shit.* I leapt to the side. Heart scrambled back.

The bottle fell, Wind bucked it.

A burst of lightning sprouted from the bottle and tore through the air, striking Celestia in the chest, at two very precise points.

Two things happened in the same instant. The room filled with mist, and Celestia's chest started to rise and fall.

Wind rushed over and instantly re-started compressions. "Good, we've got a shot. Blueblood, hand me that syringe by the bed."

I scrambled to pick it up.

Heart's mouth hung open. "What. Just. Happened."

"Cloud buck."

"But you're a-"

She tore off her coat with a single hoof, never stopping compressions.

I thanked the heavens her stumps weren't swollen.

"Pegasus," she said. "Now are there any more stupid questions or are you going to help me save this filly's life?"

#

Twenty Three

"You know," I began, "the dramatic tension here is somewhat let down by the fact that you're alive and well."

The princess narrowed her eyes. Had she been less tired I think it might have killed me where I stood. "Blueblood, think. About. It. Why couldn't I stop Nightmare Moon on my own? Why couldn't I help directly

with Discord? Why do I spend every, single, waking moment forcing myself to be as calm as ponily possible?"

I had nothing to say.

She continued.