

To Be a Better Stallion

By Autumn Wind



Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	The Paragon of Fools	3
Chapter 2	Dreams of a Dreamy Colt	11
Chapter 3	He Wears a Mask	22
Chapter 4	To Look Back at One's Hoofprints	41
Chapter 5	The Turning Point	58
Chapter 6	Of Memories and Fantasies	73

Chapter 1

The Paragon of Fools

How... quaint. I would have expected a lady of her charm to reside in a village with far more... grandeur.

Ponyville's market was rather crowded today, and many ponies were up and about. Stallions and mares everywhere held shop, proudly offering their wares to everypony out shopping. Younger colts and fillies bounded across the market place, galloping to meet their friends. To the left, three flower fillies were discussing thorny roses with a unicorn whose flank bore a safety pin. To the right, a turquoise unicorn mare and her earth pony companion were pondering the wares of a famous apple stand. Rushing across the sky with a bag of letters, a blond-maned grey pegasus sped to her next delivery. Her eyes carefully watched the scenery ahead and to her left, respectively.

However, of all the ponies strolling around the market, none attracted as much attention as the young unicorn stallion strolling down the main street. He kept up a brisk trot, visibly relishing the swooning looks of the young mares whose attention his dashing looks attracted. His coat shone under the noon sun, a dazzling white as pure as diamond. He bore a long, golden mane, which was finely groomed and fluttered with the purest of elegance as he trotted. Piercing through those golden waves, his ivory horn stood proudly towards the sky. Its remarkable length did nothing to humble his regal appearance. He had chosen to dress simply today, bearing only a simple yet elegant bowtie of a most poignant burgundy and a pair of light silk saddlebags. The magnificent Prince Blueblood had come to town on personal business.

Despite the multiple fillies observing him with curiosity and interest, his attention was directed to a single point: Carousel Boutique. He could have recognized it out of a hundred other stores. Between the lacy curtains, the elegant arabesques, the diamond motifs and those most lovely silhouettes, there was no doubt that this was the boutique he had been looking for. Prince Blueblood's favorite fashion magazine had had only the greatest of praises for Rarity's first attempts at dabbling in colts' tuxedos.

Oh, Rarity, wonderful Rarity. How marvelous it is to find you at last! I have so long awaited the day where I would see your beautiful eyes anew, and finally, it has come!

Our first date at the Gala wasn't the epitome of perfection, I'll concede. You were not ready to face the hardships of accompanying an aristocrat such as I, and you made a few mistakes, but nothing unforgivable.

The attack of that monstrous mountain of cake provoked you into losing control of your frustrations, I can presume. You obviously said words you did not mean. Noticing one's failures to hold up to certain standards can be so disconcerting, I know. After all, why would you blame me, who was so kind as to accompany you through the gala all night, making sure you would not have to mingle with the lesser ponies? Curse that blasted cake! At the sight of all that icing everywhere, I passed out, and you were forced to leave before I came back to myself.

But Rarity, oh beautiful Rarity, I have sought you out once more, and now nothing will stop us. By now you have surely researched the protocol of high society courtship, and you await me every day, for you know that my lovestruck heart will lead me to you!

Prince Blueblood could already imagine the scene. She would open the door, their eyes would meet. He would present her with a lovely bouquet. They would hesitate for a moment, and then a kiss would unite them forever, allowing them to resume what they had failed to achieve a month ago. That was the only way things could go. After all, he was the most desirable stallion in all of Canterlot, and she was such a marvelous mare.

At the gala, oh, fair lady,

Your fierce beauty caught my eye!

In an instant you stole my heart, at the gala~

*Oh what a thrill, when our hooves touched,
and how wonderful your smile.*

So many dreams it inspired,

That night at the gala~

~~~

The indigo door slammed shut with a resounding crash, leaving the beleaguered stallion to blankly stutter the remainder of his planned speech.

“-and so I have come to offer you a second chance.”

For several minutes, Blueblood hesitated. Such a fierce refusal was a very uncommon experience for him. The noble daughters of his family's friends were usually head over hooves for him. What was he supposed to do now? He thought for a moment.

*She slammed the door in the middle of my sentence! How rude! This... can't be the mare who struck my heart at the Gala, can it? Surely she must have made a mistake and confused me for one of her more... unruly neighbors.*

With a deep breath, he adjusted his bowtie and straightened his mane, before knocking a second time. This time, the door did not open. He saw her form pass in front of the elegantly frosted window and linger for a moment before disappearing into the boutique. Moments later, a light creak was heard.

Prince Blueblood's eyes lowered towards the ground, from where the sound had emanated. A small pet door swung on its hinges. Blueblood observed in confusion. A speck of white caught his left eye, and his head turned.

*Hmm... What a most immaculate pet she has. This is a mare who knows elegance to its finest details. Look at that finely brushed coat, and that wonderful little gem studded collar. That ribbon on her head is a very nice touch. Look at that little tail, swishing to and fro. Who's a nice kitty? Who is? Ooo! Would you look at that? She's smiling at me. My, Lady Rarity has done some very good work polishing these claws... and look at these fangs...*

Suddenly, in a burst of white, there was no more elegance. There was only agony.

~~~

After several minutes of panicked galloping and an unwanted but necessary plunge into the first body of water he could find, Blueblood had finally been relieved of the monstrous plague of claws and fangs that had taken to assaulting his flanks. Hissing with the fury of a thousand tigers, Opalescence had run back into town. Letting loose a sigh from deep within the confines of his heart, the ravaged unicorn called forth a brush from his saddlebag and took to fixing the terrible damage the feline and the plunge had inflicted on his wonderful grooming.

She has... rejected me? How is this possible?

As far as he could remember, no mare had ever refused his company before, had they? Prince Blueblood sifted through his memories for a moment, remembering the other fillies who had loved him. Had he ever been rejected?

His first love had been a pegasus filly by the name of Amethyst, the daughter of Baron Emerald Heart. She had sought him out when the two of them were very young, neither of them having yet earned their cutie marks. They had shared some happy days, but his mother had forbidden him from seeing her again. Supposedly, Amethyst was not truly invested in their family's well-being, and would only dampen their honor. He had wished to oppose, but he knew that if he had, mother would have given him the spanking of a lifetime and confined him to his bedroom for at least a week.

There had been more fillies like her. They had sought him out, or their families had suggested arranged marriages, but in the end it had always been him who had had to end the relations. His mother had never approved of the mares he had found interest in, and the idea of confronting the matriarch of his family was simply not something he could consider. Aristocratic families such as his had strong honor codes, and there was no going against them without attracting much negative attention to oneself.

However, for all his failed romances, he had to come to a conclusion: he had never been rejected before. The experience was entirely alien to him, a feeling the likes of which he had never had to face before, a deep sorrow, tearing at his heart.

Oh, woe is me! What is a stallion to do! Love is but a cruel mistress, setting my heart ablaze for a mare who will not even look at me. Whatever

shall I do! Oh, fate, I beg of thee, give me a chance to soothe my bleeding soul! Give me hope!

~~~

Sweet Apple Acres had been a loud nest of chaos all day, thanks to Apple Bloom and her friends trying every single farm task they could possibly think of, from “Cutie Mark Crusader Pig Feeders, YAY!” all the way to “Cutie Mark Crusader Field Ploughers, YAY!” Applejack had been working her tail off all day doing damage control, from reeling the escaped pig back in to replanting the carrots and potatoes that had been prematurely uprooted.

Finally, after several hours of frolicking to and fro and making a nuisance of themselves, the three fillies had headed to Apple Bloom’s bedroom for a sleepover. Applejack had wished them all good night and tasked her brother with checking on the fillies now and then, to make sure they didn’t get into any more shenanigans for the day. She needed some rest, and she knew the best way to find it.

Night had fallen just recently, and Luna’s moon was waking up in the sky, bathing the outskirts of Ponyville in a quiet glow. There was hardly a sound to break the silence, only the singing of a single cricket and the quiet babbling of a placid stream. Applejack was out on the quiet path to Fluttershy’s cottage, figuring her pegasus friend wouldn’t be too busy at this time of the evening and would appreciate an impromptu friendly visit. After all, by now, most of the animals had gone to sleep.

After a few minutes of trotting, a white figure attracted her attention in the distance. Applejack took a few more steps to get a better look, trying to identify the mysterious pony. It was a young white unicorn stallion, just a little older than her. He was slumped over by the riverside, just looking at his own reflection. His stature was quite large; he looked to be almost as tall as Big Macintosh, if a lot thinner. His grooming could have easily rivaled that of Rarity, Applejack thought to herself. Perhaps he was a visitor from Manehattan or Canterlot.

Then, as she approached just a few steps more, she spotted his cutie mark. That eight-branched compass star, she knew she had seen it somewhere before. Where had she met this colt before? Her mind went on a wild rodeo, trying to stick a name and history on that silhouette. He was a

city pony, that much was sure. Perhaps she had met him at school in Manehattan. That would have been rather unlikely. After all, that was so long ago, she wouldn't have recognized one of her classmates this easily. Had she seen him at the gala?

The realization struck her. Of course! It was all clear now. Rarity had come to her apple stand with this noblecolt during the Gala. He had been one of only two ponies to try her pastries during the whole night, and he had had the rudeness to spit it back out. She remembered offering them the pastries on the house when he had made it clear that he expected Rarity to pay. Most of all, she remembered Rarity coming to cry on her shoulder that night, when she had no longer been able to hide her sadness at the miserable failure that her date had wound up being. That last part, Applejack couldn't forgive. She didn't know why Blueblood had come to Ponyville or why he was just out there sitting by the river, but she knew she had a few choice words to tell him. She sped up into a gallop, her hooves thundering as she approached him furiously.

"Blueblood! I've got a piece of my mind for you! I don't know what kinda stuck-up upbringing you got as a foal, but back in my neck of the woods, stallions learn to treat a lady with respect! You really went and upset my friend Rarity there at the Gala, and I won't stand for that. You're gonna get back to Rarity's this instant and present her with some well deserved apology... well I sure wasn't expectin' that."

Applejack had figured Blueblood would get mad at her. She'd figured maybe one of his guards was hiding and would get the drop on her. She was ready for that. She'd expected him to lash right back at her, to call her a country bumpkin with no manners, or perhaps to simply throw some vicious invectives out before vanishing into the night. She was ready for that too. She was also ready for him to completely ignore her.

However, never in a million years could she have predicted the reaction she got from Blueblood.

The unicorn had turned to face Applejack, with the most pitiful face she had ever seen. He kept his eyes down to the ground, refusing to look at her directly. His normally pristine cheeks were drenched with bitter tears. His ears hung limply on either side of his head. Applejack hadn't seen such a miserable face since her little sister's when the filly had expressed sadness at Twilight Sparkle not staying for the family brunch.



Blueblood hesitated for a moment. Doubts were running through his mind at full gallop. Rarity had been the first mare to ever call him out on his behavior. However, Rarity had also been the first mare he had been involved with who was not herself part of Equestria's aristocracy. A painful sob escaped him.

"Is... is that really how I come off? Rude and stuck-up?"

Applejack didn't need to pause; the answer was immediate to her. She'd seen some of his antics firsthand at the gala, and she had heard many tales of his misbehavior from Rarity. She gave an awkward chuckle.

"Yep. That's exactly it. Clear as day."

Prince Blueblood blubbered for a moment, seeking a rebuttal to a perceived slight. To his great disappointment, nothing came of it; by now, he was fully aware of his behavior. Between Rarity's words finally striking home and the farmer mare's strongly-worded criticism, even the most oblivious of colts would have had no choice but to recognize his faults. Blueblood stuttered a few times before finally giving in to the hysterics.

"But... but... when I... Oh, who am I kidding? I'm hopeless. Prince Blueblood, the tragic foal. What is the purpose of a noblecolt who has known only perfection all his life? What is the fate of a pony who knows not hardship or pain when one cruel day they opt to wage war on his soul?"

As he spoke, Blueblood slowly rose back onto his feet, gradually rising higher and higher on his hind legs. His front hooves were quivering and flailing about in synchronism with his dramatic ranting.

"Oh, Equestria! This poor colt begs you, give me hope! My mind is but the destroyed ruins of the dreams of a city of gold! Just now, I find myself a mere shadow of the stallion I sought to be! Incapable of being a paragon, I have instead become a fool!"

Blueblood had reached an almost vertical posture, his forelegs pointing straight at the sky. His voice had erupted into a booming call, bellowing his fear and pain at the heavens. Applejack stared at him, flabbergasted. She was reminded of Rarity, but never had she expected such a display from a noble such as Blueblood. She observed silently, knowing from experience that it was pointless to interrupt him.

“Celestia! Oh, great aunt in the sky! Please show me the way! I am wandering blind! Is this the end of this poor forsaken foal? I beseech thee, oh Princess! Give me a sign! How, oh, how can I redeem myself?”

The world swirled around the hysterical colt for a moment as the impracticality of his posture caught up to him. Ponies were not meant to stand on their hind legs for such a long time. Blueblood stumbled backwards, falling onto his back with a heavy thump. In a daze, he opened his eyes a moment later. Stern green eyes were looking down on him, showing amusement and concern in equal parts.

“Uh-huh. You okay there, sugarcube?”

Blueblood rolled over, back onto his legs. His coat was dirty and his mane was disheveled, and somewhere along the way, he had lost his bowtie. His head hung low, and he gave a deep sigh.

“I’ve... seen better days.”

Applejack hesitated for a moment. She’d heard some pretty awful things about Blueblood from Rarity, but right now, he looked like he could really use some help. After a moment of reflection, she decided it wouldn’t be right to just leave him there, and that she might as well take the plunge.

“How ‘bout you follow me back into town and we’ll see what we can do for your troubles. It’s getting pretty late out here.”

Applejack pondered for a moment.

“I reckon my brother’ll know what to do with you.”

# Chapter 2

## Dreams of a Dreamy Colt

Room 36 of the “Coltfort Inn”, Ponyville’s premier and only luxury hotel, was dark and quiet. A beam of moonlight shone through the large window, bathing the room in a soothing glow. In the king-sized bed, Prince Blueblood slept comfortably, oblivious to the crazy days he was about to live. His face displayed an innocent, almost foalish smile.

~~~

The crisp autumn leaves crunched under the young colt’s hooves as he galloped cheerfully amongst the trees. The forest extended for miles on every side, never breaking from the same pattern. The trees were tall and their tops converged into a wide roof of entwined branches. Golden leaves adorned the summits, blotting out most of the sunlight, leaving the ground a patchwork of glimmering sunbeams. The quiet gurgling of a small stream and the occasional bird song provided a soothing musical ambiance. The land was welcoming and comforting, it was calling out to the foal; “Come, let’s go play!”

Today, the young Prince Blueblood was on an adventure! It didn’t matter what mother thought, he could do what he wanted today. He was going to have fun! The forest rang with the pure laughter of a young colt free from worry, free to be himself without the oppression of public opinion.

He frolicked from place to place, chasing small animals, snacking on wild berries, trying to climb up trees, being distracted by fluttering butterflies, failing to climb up trees, splashing around in the stream, plunging into piles of fallen leaves, spooking away birds, failing some more at climbing up trees, and overall just being a rambunctious little colt having a wild time without a care in the world.

After an eternity, however, fatigue caught up with the young prince. Even the most refined, priciest candy in all of Equestria could only ever fuel so much playtime.

However, as he settled down for a moment and slowed his pace to a trot, Blueblood realized that while he had been having fun, things had

changed in the woods. The sunlight had dimmed. The treetops were now much closer, giving the forest a claustrophobic feel. The birds were no longer chirping and the stream had been silenced. The whispers of the wind in the leaves had turned to hushed voices, hissing their disapproval.

“Has this colt not been taught manners?” “How improper.” “Tss... such misconduct.” “Colts should be seen, not heard.” “How bothersome.” “This colt is lacking in discipline.”

Then, without any warning, the commanding voice of a distinguished matron boomed through the wild, freezing him in place.

“Prince Blueblood of Canterlot! What did I tell you about running off on your own!”

~~~

“Imorrymotherpleasedontspankme!”

Blueblood shot awake in a panic, shouting almost incoherently. His eyes stayed shut tight, wincing in apprehension. He nervously awaited the far too familiar pain to his flank, only for a mix of confusion and relief to gradually wash over him when his expectations failed to be fulfilled.

Slowly, he realized what had transpired. That dream again. As he laid his head back on the pillow, he soon became aware of a strange fact. Though his mother’s voice had gone away, the hushed noises of the crowd still echoed. This peculiar phenomenon left him baffled for a moment, until he realized that the voices had become more muffled, that the words were completely gone. Only the general hustle and bustle of the average noise of ponies talking remained.

His confusion melted into a frown. Blueblood stepped down to the floor on the left side of his bed like he did every morning. The noise kept going. Knowing he would be facing the same window he did every morning, he brought his hoof to bang against the wall.

“Keep it down in the gardens! Some ponies are trying to sleep here!”

His eyes shot open when his hoof hit canvas where a window’s glass should have been. The sight of a sunlit orchard just inches away from his face greeted him. Startled, he stumbled back and crashed onto the mattress.

He wasn't in his room. Where there should have been a window, there was a painting. Gradually, it all came back to him as the torpor of his rough awakening ebbed away.

He was in the small town of Ponyville, having elected to stay the night in the fanciest hotel the area had to offer. He was to meet a mysterious farmer by the name of Big Macintosh, supposedly a stallion well-versed in humility and chivalry. He had promised to change, to become better, for himself and for Rarity.

The thought scared him. Did he really need to change? He had been happy up to now, hadn't he? There were hundreds of mares out there who would have given everything for his affections. It wasn't too late to quit and go home, forget about what had happened and return to his decadent life of luxury.

The thought taunted him. He could still get out of it all. Did he want to?

Blueblood got off the mattress for the second time this morning. He mulled over the problem endlessly, walking around the bed and into the larger part of the luxury bedroom. The various options rushed through his head.

If he left, he'd be home by early afternoon, and he'd be free to recover from his emotions in his private quarters with a glass of his favorite grape nectar before joining with his usual horn fencing club for some good exercise. Then, perhaps he would head to a nice little soirée, enjoy some society time, and try to forget anything unusual had happened at the gala. However, he would forever wonder what could have been.

If he did go along, he'd probably have to endure countless ordeals and confront himself. He would have to make the largest effort of his life and rise above who he was. It was very likely that he would come out somepony entirely different. He might forever regret his choice, or perhaps his life would be better for it in the end.

This was a rare occasion for him. He was facing a difficult, meaningful decision. This wasn't an issue across which his gigantic fortune could carry him. What should he choose? What should he do?

He sat down at the small writing desk that the room offered, rifling through his belongings in search of an answer. A scrap of paper stashed away in his wallet caught his attention; a magazine clipping.

“Cufflink’s Discovery of the Week” was his favorite colt’s fashion column, one which he read religiously. Cufflink, a black-maned white pegasus, was known as one of the greatest experts in colts’ and stallions’ clothing in all of Equestria, and his suggestions and tips were considered priceless amongst the male noblesse of Canterlot.

This particular clipping, however, had a special meaning to Prince Blueblood. His eyes ventured along the first line of the article. Four words stood out most of all. “Carousel Boutique”, “Ponyville” and “Rarity”. A small picture of the beautiful unicorn decorated the text with elegance. Blueblood’s heart fluttered at the sight, but the reality of the situation soon brought him back to earth. She hated him. He had no chance with her if he couldn’t change himself. She was not interested in the ways of the noblesse.

A piece of parchment was stapled to the article. Though he knew the words to the exact letter, having written them in the evening before going to bed, he read the note once more. His immaculate hornwriting decorated the paper, every letter perfected into a flourish, every word carefully polished. He had been taught to write well, and the memories of a ruler painfully rapping against his horn with every mistake were a permanent influence.

“On this day of... I, Prince Blueblood the... swear on my honor and... shall follow my quest for self-improvement... greater destiny... pride of my family... struck down by lightning... Oh, are you serious?”

Putting the note and the article down, Prince Blueblood sighed. Knowing he would probably have given up when faced with difficulties, he had locked himself into a contract with his own honor. If he gave up now, he would never be able to forgive himself for breaking such a pact.

“Sometimes, I’m a little too cunning for my own good.”

This wasn’t just about himself, though. He had also made a promise to that farm girl, and he’d be damned if he broke his word, no matter who he had given it to. That was one lesson from his childhood he had taken to heart. An honorable colt never breaks his word. He remembered her exact words from the last evening.

*“Now look here,” she had said, “If I’m goin’ to saddle my brother with helpin’ you, I need to make sure you’re not going to waste his time or mine.*

*I have no means to tell whether or not you're lyin' about wantin' to improve, but I want you to give me your word that you're plannin' to go along with this, no matter what."*

Blueblood sighed at the memory. Obviously, he'd agreed without even giving things a moment of thought. Emotions had always made him irrational.

"Oh, what did I get myself into? All I asked for was an elegant mare, and I wind up honor bound to my own loony emotional self."

~~~

"Oh, what did I get myself into? All I asked for was a gentlecolt and I wind up with a delusional stalker."

Rarity sighed, redirecting her attention to carefully sewing yet another tuxedo sleeve. It was hard work, sewing suit after suit, but it would all be worth it when her line became famous all across Equestria. Soon, her spotlight would shine even brighter. The fabulous Cufflink, famous columnist of "Colts' Fashion Monthly", had ranted and raved about her "Gentlecolt of Ponyville" line.

With Sweetie Belle at school and Opalescence having her grooming redone by Fluttershy after a particularly messy plunge into the Ponyville stream, it was her best chance at getting a lot of work done.

Still, she couldn't get the worries out of her head. What kind of loony did that Blueblood have to be to seek her all the way to Ponyville after the rejection she'd given him at the gala? Was he going to come by again? What was she to do?

A knock at the door startled Rarity out of her thoughts. She shook off the worries, feeling it important to be at her best for whomever might be visiting. She trotted to the window, adjusting her mane on the way, and called out in a singsong voice.

"Coming!"

She peeked out through the yellow lace curtains of the boutique's window, expecting that annoying colt again. A pleasant feeling of relief washed over her when she saw that her guest was another pony entirely.

“Applejack! How nice of you to visit! Just give me a moment, I’ll have this door open in no time!”

With a series of clattering noises, Rarity undid a half dozen latches and locks, motioning for the very confused Applejack to come in. The farmer mare took great care in wiping her hooves on the doormat before entering, fully aware of how protective Rarity was of her boutique’s imported carpet. Memories of Rarity’s warnings still rung clearly in her ears. *“Careful now, this rug is an expensive import, directly from the far Humplands of Camelia!”*

“What’s with all the locks, Rarity? Musta been the first time I’ve seen this door locked in years. Somepony givin’ you trouble?”

Rarity stopped in her tracks. How would Applejack react if she knew? She’d probably think it was silly of her to lock herself in because of Blueblood. As she shut the door behind Applejack, an idea flashed in her head. Shuddering at the disgusting memories going through her mind, she offered an innocent grin, attempting to hide the truth.

“Ah! It’s those... those revolting Diamond Dogs. I heard they were looking for me, something about finding more... rubies! Yes, that’s right, more rubies. So... I... of course decided that I would... hide in here and keep my door locked.”

Applejack shot the unicorn a stare of disbelief.

“Rarity, don’t take me for a foal. You know as well as I do that them varmints wouldn’t get within a hundred hooves of you even if Princess Celestia told them to. This all wouldn’t have anythin’ to do with that Prince Blueblood fella, would it?”

Rarity’s grin melted into a disappointed frown. Of course, the Element of Honesty would catch her in such a bald-faced lie.

“Oh... I guess there isn’t much point in hiding things from you now, is there? Yes, it’s all about him... Wait, how ever did you figure it out?”

“Well, it’s a pretty long story, actually, an’-”

Rarity motioned for the farmer mare to follow her, leading her to the comfortable little tea salon that was set up in the corner of Carousel Boutique.

“What do you say I take a moment to make us some tea, and you tell me all about it?”

~~~

“Okay, so let me get the story straight, Applejack. You’re telling me that you found Prince Blueblood on the edge of the stream near Fluttershy’s home.”

“Yep.”

“And today, he will be meeting with your brother, about learning to be a true humble gentlecolt.”

“Yep.”

“All for my attention.”

“Well, I don’t know about that part, but it sure sounds that way.”

Rarity blinked in confusion for a few moments. She stuttered for a moment, before a wave of frustration came over her. She stood up from the sofa she had been occupying, turning away from Applejack, clearly disapproving.

“Darling, of all ponies, I thought you would be the last one to fall for his lies. He’s a snake, a rotten apple! He’s only showing good graces for his own profit! That colt is faker than Photo Finish’s accent!”

Applejack was not going to just sit there and let Rarity call her gullible. Worked up by the sudden conflict, she stood up and shouted back.

“Now look here, missy! I know a liar when I see one, and that Blueblood fella there was definitely not lyin’. He was bawlin’ his eyes out like a foal, cryin’ your name to the skies! Most pitiful thing I ever laid eyes on! Now you’re tryin’ to tell me he’s lyin’! Some Element of Generosity you are!”

“Crying... my name?”

Rarity’s bravado collapsed at the mention of Prince Blueblood’s heartbreak. The farmer mare had omitted this part from the original story, somehow believing that her story would go over better for it. Her legs shaking under her, she stumbled back into her sofa, seeming slightly disoriented from the emotion.

“Nothin’ less. Kinda overdramatic if you ask me, but still, that’s the truth. Now look. He wants to get better. He promised. I agreed to get Big Macintosh to help him, but only if you agreed. This whole story has you and him at the middle of it, and I’d rather not have anythin’ goin’ on that you disapprove of. So, I’m askin’ you. Would you allow him to stay around Ponyville and try to improve himself like he says?”

Rarity bit her lower lip, hesitating. Just a moment ago, she would have liked nothing more than to see him ran out of town. However, Applejack’s honest words had left her curious. Could there be more to Prince Blueblood than the royal pain she had endured at the Gala? No. She didn’t want to believe it. *He did look elegant in that bowtie, though. His mane was well combed, too. Oh! He also has those... mmm... well toned flanks. No, no, no! What am I thinking?* Truly, she had never seen anything positive about him. Still, her curiosity was piqued. What would happen if he stayed? Was there any hope for good to come out of this? She regained her composure. This was not the time to show weakness.

“I don’t know, Applejack. After what I’ve seen of him, I really don’t trust him. He’s up to something. I’m sure of it. He’s planning something nefarious.”

Applejack sighed. She’d expected Rarity to be reticent. She knew her friend to often be harsh in her judgment. Furthermore, the prince had looked so pitiful, so genuinely distraught. She couldn’t just let things end here. Somehow, she felt there was potential for good to come out of his stay in Ponyville. She couldn’t help but ask one last time.

“Rarity, I’m not askin’ you to trust him. I’m askin’ you to trust me. I know you don’t think there’s any hope for him, and I’ll admit I have my doubts too. But... somehow, I can’t shake the feelin’ somethin’ good might come out of this. Now, if you’re really sure you don’t want to give him a chance to improve, I’ll be tellin’ him he’s got to go. But, before that, I’m askin’ one last time. Will you, yes or no, give Blueblood a chance to improve himself?”

Having lost her composure again at the heartfelt speech, Rarity gave Applejack a pleading look. She didn’t want to answer the question. She tried to edge her way out of it. Applejack was having none of it. She countered Rarity’s teary gaze with a determined look of her own. They were at a standoff for several seconds, until Applejack decided some bargaining was in order.

"I swear he won't be comin' around here until you say he can come around here. Not if I can help it."

Rarity blinked a few times, remaining silent. Her bottom lip quivered, and her eyes began to well up.

"Pinkie Pie swear?"

Applejack didn't even need a second of thought.

"Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye."

There was another long pause. Rarity felt her heart pulsing in her chest. She knew the decision she was about to make would probably make the next few days a lot more dramatic, if not the next few years. Finally, with a small sniffle, she resigned herself to destiny. Perhaps, just perhaps, fairy tales could come true.

"Then... he can stay. I'll give him a chance."

Applejack edged close to the unicorn, draping a foreleg over her shoulder and drawing her into a hug. The decision had been very difficult, that much was clear. Rarity's eyes were glistening with tears, and she had fallen silent. A tight hug brought the friends together, giving the unicorn a warm, quiet moment to recover from the torrent of emotions that had just washed over her.

"That's mighty noble of you, Rarity. Mighty noble."

~~~

Prince Blueblood walked out of "*La Rose Dorée*", better known to some as "the priciest restaurant in all of Ponyville." It was quite a relief to have found such a place and to know that culinary excellence did exist in such a minuscule town.

At least I've secured proper lodging and food. Maybe this won't be quite as hard as I expected. My, Chef Cordon Bleu can certainly be proud of his crêpes.

Pondering whether or not he had been excessively generous with his tip, Blueblood set out towards the farm he had been pointed to. The way was clear and simple, and he certainly wouldn't have any trouble making it there

quickly. However, just as he was about to engage on the short way out of Ponyville, the voice of a young filly caught his ears.

“Don’t you think this new necklace goes, like, perfectly with my tia-Whoa! Look! Silver Spoon! Isn’t that...”

A pair of shrill, excited squeals rang out, quickly followed by the clattering of two sets of hooves against pavement. He turned, surprised, and saw two young fillies galloping over to him.

“Oh my gosh! You’re... Prince Blueblood!”

The pink earth pony filly had almost screamed in excitement. An elegant ornate tiara sat proudly on her head, much like a similar one marked her flank. Most likely, the item of jewelry had been crafted to match. She was almost jumping in place with excitement. Her painstakingly brushed purple and white mane bobbed as she hopped from her front to her rear hooves in excitement.

“You’re, like, even more, like, totally handsome than in the magazines!”

The second filly, a grey earth pony with an ash-colored braided mane, swayed from side to side, on the verge of fainting. A deep red blush washed over her face as her spoon-marked flanks swayed from side to side. She was completely lost in the moment. The two of them squealed in excitement almost twice as much as they spoke.

Prince Blueblood was fully aware of his reputation. He had quite often made a scene of himself in the various high class salons of Canterlot. This, along with his status, had quickly made him a noted celebrity of the gossip rags. The general population only saw him as more of a vapid noble for it, but now and then a mare or filly would latch on to his presence with amazement. However, these two young damsels were by far the most excited he had ever seen. Standing proudly and flashing them a winning smile, he decided to play along.

“Prince Blueblood? Why yes, that is me. Who do I have the honor of meeting?”

The two fillies almost fell on top of one another in awe. He had just spoken to them. The amazing, elegant, handsome, dreamy, most wonderful Prince Blueblood of Canterlot had spoken to them. Oh, the

others would be so jealous of them. Of the two, Diamond Tiara was the first to regain enough composure to talk.

“Um... um... like... my name is D-D-Diamond Tiara and... this is, like, my friend Silver Spoon. And... um... um...”

The grey filly finally managed to get back onto her legs, having spent most of the last minute leaning on her friend for support.

“We’re absolutely, like, totally your biggest fans!”

Almost in synchronicity, the two young fillies reached into their school saddlebags. In an instant, Diamond Tiara was thrusting two sheets of colorful stationery at him, and Silverspoon almost poked him with the tip of a silver-plated fountain pen.

“Can we please have your autograph, Prince Blueblood?”

With a beaming smile, Blueblood’s horn lit up and levitated the paper and pen from the fillies’ grasp. With a few elegant swoops, both pieces of paper now bore perfect inscriptions:

To my greatest fan, Diamond Tiara. ~Prince Blueblood

To my greatest fan, Silver Spoon. ~Prince Blueblood

As the papers were set down into their hooves, the two fillies tried to stutter a few words of thanks. In their awe, however, they failed even that. All they could manage was to swoon and collapse onto one another. Chuckling to himself, Blueblood simply levitated the pen back into Silver Spoon’s saddle bag before walking away. The market place was plenty busy today, and somepony would obviously pick up the two fillies. That is, without causing them to faint a second time. Glad to have made this little stop, Blueblood set out on the road to Sweet Apple Acres, where his fate awaited him. He trotted with a spring in his step and a smile on his face, displaying renewed confidence.

Perhaps this stay in Ponyville won’t be so awful after all.

Chapter 3

He Wears a Mask

Atop the tallest hill in all of Sweet Apple Acres stood Risky Roots, the most adventurous tree on the farm, and the only one to have the courage to grow in such an odd place. Through the years, the young sapling had been a pioneer: innovating, standing strong, and making an example of itself. Its chosen place was an odd one for sure, but Risky was sticking to its choice. Its growth had proven it fully capable of making its ambitions come true.

Today, the apple tree was in the company of a kindred soul. In its shade, Big Macintosh stood proudly, looming over his little kingdom. A long time ago, his ancestor, Cortland Apple, had purchased this land with the ambition of making it one of the largest and most prosperous orchards in all of Equestria. A dozen generations later, that dream had long been fulfilled. The passion had been passed down from parents to children generation after generation, and there was no end in sight to this wonderful dream.

Ma and pa sure did good work on this farm back when they were around, just like Grandpa and Granny Smith before them. Applejack's doing great in following pa's legacy, and I'm willin' to bet little Apple Bloom will be the one to finally return the barn to its former glory when she grows up.

Of course, he was no pushover himself, balancing equal parts backbreaking labor and organized bookkeeping to keep the farm standing. Today, Granny Smith hadn't much left in her except to live peacefully through her days, sharing words of wisdom and delicious recipes with family and friends alike. However, Big Macintosh knew just how major her contributions had been to the farm. Back when she had been a younger and more energetic mare, Granny Smith had been the brains of the operation. It was thanks to her that Sweet Apple Acres had become a well-known name and that several towns in Equestria regularly purchased large amounts of their produce, allowing them to greatly expand the farm's potential.

As her successor in the farm's management, Big Macintosh had a plan of his own: He would make Sweet Apple Acres the first orchard to ever sell apples to lands outside of Equestria. She had taught him well in the ways of business, and he would make her proud.

Big Macintosh smiled peacefully. There was nothing quite like spring at the orchard. Much like a choir singing out in one voice, the trees offered a perfect harmony of flowers, giving the gift of a flood of bright colors and sweet scents to any willing spectator.

The stallion was pulled out of his contemplation by a speck of bright white in the distance, which was soon revealed to be a white unicorn stallion walking down the path leading to the farm from Ponyville.

That crazy party filly, the rainbow pegasus, Princess Celestia's personal student, and now that highfalutin' noble. I swear, Applejack, you have a knack for running into the strangest ponies.

As he set out towards the farm's main entrance to greet the incoming guest, Big Macintosh thought about the next few days, wondering just how things would work. He had agreed to help Prince Blueblood, of course, knowing that the colt was genuinely seeking to change. The Apple family was always open to strangers in need.

That being said, he also had to think about the farm. It was planting season, and it was very important for the work to get done as soon as possible. The pegasus weather report had warned of a series of spring showers in the afternoon culminating into an overnight rainstorm. He'd need to wrap up work earlier today if he didn't want to get stuck working under the weather.

A sudden flash of inspiration brought these two ideas together, causing an amused smile to manifest on Big Macintosh's face. This was going to be hilarious.

~~~

Prince Blueblood observed the farm from a distance as he approached. Over the hilly terrain, he could only see the leafy crowns of the flower-clad

trees as he approached, and the scenery was magnificent and colorful, a noble sight indeed.

*So, these are the famed Sweet Apple Acres I have heard about. This certainly seems like a nice place. The flowers are a nice touch.*

However, as he closed the distance separating him from a clearer view of the orchard, Blueblood lost control of his jaw as he stared in shock. All over the orchard was loose earth. More loose earth than he had ever laid eyes on. He had expected that the paths between the trees would have been paved with stone tiles or other materials of the sort, or at least, at the bare minimum, gravel. Apparently, even that much had been denied. Coming to a sudden stop, Blueblood gasped in horror.

“W-what is this travesty! It’s... an ocean of dirt! Oh, the horror! It’s a cornucopia of filth! The Promised Land of all that is unclean! The El Dorado of mud and stains! Why must this world make a mockery of me?”

Dirt. So much dirt. More dirt than the eye could see. More dirt than he ever could have imagined. A heavenly roof of flowers over a horrible pit of dirt. Prince Blueblood found himself shaking in place, nervous at the idea of having to set hoof in that place. How would he ever keep his coat clean in such a place? Maybe it wasn’t too late to turn tail and flee...

*No, no. I can’t back out now. I have my honor. Prince Blueblood does not back down in the face of adversity... or dirt.*

Prince Blueblood swallowed nervously. He focused for a moment, and his horn shimmered brightly, a bright white aura lighting the farm’s wooden gate and pushing it open. The unicorn set down the path to the main barn, an evident pained expression on his face. He could feel himself getting dirtier by the second as his steps kicked up small puffs of dust.

“Hello? Is anypony home?”

The sound of a second pair of hooves began echoing in the distance. They were heavy steps for sure, no doubt made by a stallion of a remarkable stature. A deep, calm voice echoed out from the distance, and a few moments later, a large red stallion, clad in a work collar and absentmindedly chewing on a sprig of hay came into view.



“Eeyup, I’ll be right over. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

*So this is Big Macintosh? He certainly lives up to his name.*

Try as he may, Blueblood couldn’t remember ever meeting anypony so large, except for himself and Princess Celestia. Of course, she was a goddess, and he himself was, if by far, one of her royal descendants. But, what could make a farmer grow so tall, let alone that muscular? Blueblood was left puzzled.

“I take it you’re Prince Blueblood?”

So, Applejack had indeed mentioned his coming to her brother. That made things far simpler.

“Why, yes, that would be I. And to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

Blueblood made an effort to be polite. After all, he was in need of help, and the red farmer was his best chance.

“Name’s Big Macintosh. Ain’t every day we get nobility visiting ‘round these parts. Welcome to Sweet Apple Acres.”

Macintosh respectfully offered a hoofshake. The noblecolt, used to bowing from a distance, was startled and nervously stumbled back. He carefully eyed the extended hoof, noticing a dab of mud on the tip of the farmer’s hoof.

*Oh... the sacrifices I make for proper protocol.*

Shakily, Blueblood returned the favor, only to have his breath cut short by the sheer strength Macintosh had put into the gesture.

Surprised by his guest’s panicked reaction, the red stallion quickly pulled his hoof back, watching with slight confusion as the royal stood stunned, his still-outstretched hoof twitching in pain.

“I reckon I might have overdone it a little there. Mighty sorry.”

Blueblood paused for a moment, slowly lowering his sore hoof back to the ground. He inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, mentally counting to ten before answering.

*Stay polite, Blueblood. He may not be the cleanest or most distinguished pony you've met, but at least he's making a good effort to be polite, and you need his help. It would be a terrible thing to start off on awful terms.*

"Oh, that's... quite alright. Please be careful not to do it again, that being said. I doubt my hoof can take such a battering a second time. Now then, I assume your sister has already explained most of the situation to you?"

"Eeyup. Thought about it for a while. We've been having some troubles on the farm as well. 'Reckon I have an idea that could work out for both of us."

Big Macintosh motioned towards the large farmhouse up on the hill ahead.

"How 'bout we move inside so we can discuss this more comfortably?"

Blueblood paused for a moment, puzzled.

*Troubles on the farm? What does that have to do with me? I don't like where this is going. I really, really don't like where this is going.*

~~~

"I really don't like where this has gone."

In the middle of a bare field of packed dirt, Blueblood struggled to pull an old plough, grunting with every step at the exhausting effort. He was, to say the least, very glad that few ponies would ever see him like this. The paparazzi would have a field day with his current wardrobe. A set of strong rubber galoshes guarded his hooves from any offending dirt, while a brown wool poncho draped over his back and a hat woven from straw protected his precious coat and mane. It would be a shame if he were to get dirty from a wayward cloud of dust, and a tragedy if he were to catch heatstroke from the glaring sun.

“So, Macintosh. Please remind me why I agreed to this, again? I must admit that such hoof labor isn’t a very common part of my daily regimen.”

Next to the unicorn, Macintosh was having a very hard time not laughing. He could remember a few times where Applejack’s friend Rarity, a unicorn known for her cleanliness and fear of dirt, had given the farm a hand, but even she hadn’t gone to such extreme measures to keep herself clean. In contrast, Blueblood’s borrowed attire looked utterly ridiculous. He had to turn away for a moment to mask his amusement at Blueblood’s carefully-chosen words. Not a very common part indeed. Blueblood had clearly never done a minute of manual labor in his entire life.

“It’s simple, really: You wanted to develop some humility and courtesy, and the farm needed some extra help for planting season. Oh, and you said that kind of work might be good to ‘keep one’s flanks and calves well toned.’”

Blueblood swallowed his pride, giving the plough another solid pull. His shoulders were sore and his legs protested the heavy effort. Yet, if this ordeal was to help him, he would do it. His honor was at stake, after all. At first, he had thought that the farmer was asking for him to work as a repayment for the teaching. It was only logical. After all one’s time is a precious commodity. However, Big Macintosh’s stubborn refusal to accept any amount of bits instead, even an unusually large sum, had given Blueblood some insight on the true reason for this arrangement. He would learn far more from a few days on the farm than from any kind of teaching.

“If, last week, somepony had told me I would be working on a farm today, I would have laughed and called them out of their mind. Yet, here I am. Ah, the things one does for love.”

With a chuckle, Big Macintosh paused his ploughing for a moment and turned to answer.

“So that’s what your wanting to improve yourself’s all about? Sis hadn’t mentioned that. Who’s the lucky filly?”

A swarm of butterflies fluttered to Blueblood’s stomach.

“I believe you might know her, she lives in this town. Her name is Rarity.”

Big Macintosh almost choked on his ever-present sprig.

“Wait, wait. Rarity? Rarity of Carousel Boutique? Hoo wee, you’ve sure got your work cut out for you.”

Blueblood shot the farmer a puzzled glance.

“What ever do you mean?”

“Y’see, Rarity might look that way, but she’s not one of those high class noblemares lookin’ to rut their way into a big fortune. She works hard, probably even harder’n me. She does everything carefully, from working her boutique to taking care of her little sister. Sorry t’say, but I’m not sure you really stand a chance.”

A smirk traced itself on Blueblood’s face. Macintosh’s words had left him far from discouraged. Rather, his desires were bolstered, reinforced. No longer a simple conquest, she was now a challenge with a priceless reward at its end. His pride and his heart were now working in tandem.

He had his chances. She’d sought him out at the Gala, after all. Surely there must have been something about him that attracted her. He’d have to find out what and build from there. Hesitating for a moment, the unicorn figured he may as well let Macintosh be aware of the finer points of the story.

“Well, it’s... kind of a strange story actually. You see...”

The two workers settled down for a break as Blueblood recounted the entire timeline of events, from the gala to the feline assault.

“Hah, reckon maybe you’ll stand a chance if you play your cards right. Looks like y’do fine when it comes to manners, and you’ve got the same obsession with staying clean. Reckon that should earn you some points with her.”

Blueblood was standing proudly, eating up the praise with great gusto. Macintosh's next comment, however, deflated his ego entirely.

"Though, you keep up that haughty act, and she'll never even give you the time of day."

"But then, what should I do? This is what I've known all my life. We nobles are supposed to be a cut above other ponies; that's what my mother always told me. How can I simply bow to her? What would my family think?"

"You're getting this all wrong. This ain't about anyone submitting to anyone. That's not love. Love ain't about joining someone's family or getting part of their fortune or I don't know what else."

Macintosh spoke with an energy that ran contrary to his usual stoicism. Soon, he was punctuating his words with energetic gestures.

"Take your case, for example. Rarity's no gemdigger. Well, she does dig for gems, but that's to put them on dresses. She ain't what you'd normally call a gemdigger. If she accepts you at one point, it won't be for your wheelbarrows of bits or your fancy shmancy titles. It'll be because you've treated her well, and made her feel like she matters to you. You need to make that real clear in your head right now, or you ain't gonna get anywhere." Blueblood nodded in comprehension, displaying an air of silent awe.

"Love's about caring for someone and wanting to make them happy. S'about doing things, not because they profit you, but because you care for the ponies around you. It's that simple, really."

The farmer's words carried strong conviction and emotion, wisdom and experience. Blueblood hesitated for a moment, awed by the speech that had just been delivered.

"That goes against everything I've been taught, Macintosh. I... don't know what to make of it. Are you sure of what you're saying?"

"Eeyup."

“I’d... like to try what you said, doing things just to make others happy. You make it sound so fulfilling. But, it’s so strange. I don’t think I’ve done something like that before.”

A smirk traced itself on Macintosh’s face.

“Really? Never? I find that hard to believe. When’s the last time someone smiled at you?”

“Hm, this morning, I think. Why do you ask?”

“What made them smile?”

“It’s a pretty funny story, actually. These two fillies asked for my autograph. They pretty much fainted in excitement when I gave it to them.”

“How did that make you feel?”

“... I guess I felt happy that they were so full of joy, but what does that have to do with-”

Blueblood stood there for a moment, confused and blinking, as the realization dawned on him.

“Oh... Oh! I see.”

Macintosh hadn’t lost his smirk.

“Told you.”

“But where do I go from there? What should I do?”

“It’s simple, really, if you ask me. Stick around town for a while; make an effort to be nice to everypony. I reckon it’ll be an effort at first, but it’ll get easier as you go.”

“Ah! Yes, as George Oatwell so eloquently wrote, ‘He wears a mask and his muzzle grows to fit it.’ I understand!”

Macintosh didn't feel the need to answer. He'd heard of George Oatwell before, but the reference was lost on him. He contented himself with rising back up on his legs and resuming his labor. Seeing Blueblood having trouble once more with the heavy tool, he had mercy on the noble.

"Y'know what? I think you've got enough revelations to digest for today. Why don't you go mull it over wherever you feel like it and come back tomorrow morning?"

Blueblood eagerly nodded, relieved to get out of doing any more backbreaking labor for the day. Politely bowing to Big Macintosh, he headed back to town, packing up the protective vestments for the next day. His legs wobbled with every step, and his head was spinning. As he walked, he looked over his coat and mane. They weren't quite filthy, but they were certainly in need of a good cleaning.

Oh, the things I do...

~~~

Blueblood was walking down the main street of Ponyville, headed to "*La Rose Dorée*" for his evening meal, having taken a moment to stop by his hotel room and clean himself up. He was certainly taking a liking to the establishment. Distinguished and elegant, the restaurant was considered the pinnacle of haute cuisine in Ponyville. It was also recognized for its exorbitant prices and very small size, though it was clearly turning a sufficient profit from the occasional ponies seeking a gastronomical experience.

Although his body was exhausted, his morale was going strong. He'd managed to keep up with the work, and realised that he did stand a chance of redeeming himself.

The second of what would be a long series of spring showers soon began falling. Fortunately, Prince Blueblood was prepared. Though he had left the hideous poncho at his hotel room, he had had the presence of mind to bring along his fashionable navy canvas cloak.

*Hm... what should I try tonight? I must say the truffle quiche sounds very appetizing, but perhaps the orchid fricassée would be-*

A loud and cacophonous voice screeched through the sky.

“LOOK OUT BELOW!”

A blur of cyan shot down from the sky, hurtling towards Blueblood, who froze in a panic, dumbfounded at seeing everypony scamper away. Unlike the locals, the visiting noble had no idea what to expect from such a shout.

A resonating thump, a blur of colors, a painful collision, and a very cold splash later, a dazed Blueblood lay confused in a puddle of rain water while a cyan pegasus mare lay on the ground next to him, dizzy from her great plunge.

Blueblood slowly came back to his senses, shakily standing up onto all four legs. He quickly ran a mental check of his body, making sure he wasn't feeling pain. Fortunately, the collision hadn't left him injured. Unfortunately, it had left him cold and dripping wet. Looking around him, he soon spotted the perpetrator of his assault. He had heard of her before, that rainbow mare. She was Rainbow Dash, weather captain of Ponyville, victor of this year's edition of the Cloudsdale Young Flier Competition, and aspirant to the Wonderbolts. She had come much more quickly to her senses, and was now staring at him with a look of amusement.

If the fury that overtook Blueblood at that instant had been any more extreme, the sheer heat of it would have done an amazing job of drying his drenched mane. Flicking a dripping lock of golden mane away from his vision, he took a fierce step towards Rainbow Dash.

“Does my destroyed grooming amuse you so? You insane foal! You could have killed me! You disgrace of the skies! You public menace! If this were Canterlot, I would have you locked up in an instant! Do you know who I am?”

The pegasus rose up to her feet, her own anger boiling up. She flapped her wings a few times to make sure they were fine, before leaving them wide open in anger. In turn, she took a step towards Blueblood, fiercely looking him straight in the eyes.



“Yeah, I know who you are! You’re that stuck-up colt who upset Rarity at the Gala! Forget about getting any apologies from me after that!”

“Why, I never! You ruffian! Show some respect!”

“Like you would know anything about respect! Jerk!”

Rainbow Dash lowered herself to the water’s level, and fiercely flapped her wings, drenching the prince with a torrent of cold water. With a panicked yelp, Prince Blueblood attempted to shield himself with his forelegs, but only succeeded in losing his balance and falling over into the puddle with a resounding splash. Struggling to stand up, he slammed his right forehoof against the pavement with a resounding clomp.

“Jerk? How dare you! You flew like a madmare, crashed into me at breakneck speeds, almost left me injured and utterly annihilated my careful grooming! Now you refuse to apologize, and I’m the jerk?”

“Yeah, you’re the jerk, jerk! When somepony tries moves as awesome as mine, accidents are always bound to happen! I shouted to make sure nopony would get hurt, and you didn’t even try to move! If you weren’t such an oblivious upstart, none of this would have ever happened!”

“What? Surely, you must be mocking me! You dare accuse me of-”

“NOW WAIT JUST ONE APPLE FLIPPIN’ MINUTE!”

The pegasus and the unicorn were interrupted by a shout and a thunder of hooves as Applejack came to a stop near them, pushing them apart. Rainbow Dash smirked at her rival, convinced the farmer would take her side against the rude stallion.

“I’m really disappointed in the two of you! Rainbow Dash! You should be ashamed of yourself for shouting like that! Blueblood, for all that talk about wantin’ to improve, you’re pretty quick to be shoutin’ and insultin’.”

The pegasus’s grin dropped instantly, while the prince was left even more fuming.

“He’s the one who should be ashamed! He didn’t even move when I warned everypony!”

Applejack gave a disbelieving stare as her only answer, refusing to treat Rainbow Dash’s desperate excuses as anything but what they were.

“Dash, what has Mayor Mare been tellin’ you ‘bout practicing your crazy tricks over Ponyville?”

“Fiiiine. I guess I should have been more careful. Still, he didn’t have any right to be snapping at me like that!”

“There, you’re right. Still, that doesn’t excuse-”

Rainbow Dash turned to Blueblood and stuck her tongue out at him defiantly.

“Ha! I was right! I’m getting out of here, all this shouting is too much work, and I’ve got some rain clouds to deal with. See you later Applejack!”

With a powerful flap of her wings, Rainbow Dash took off, leaving Blueblood and Applejack behind. Applejack simply rolled her eyes.

“That filly, I swear. I’ll catch up with her later.”

Prince Blueblood chuckled and displayed a smug smile.

“Looks like she realised who really was in the wrong after all.”

In a flash, the earth pony turned to face Blueblood, piercing him with the most horrible of glares from under the rim of her cowfilly hat.

“Now look here. You said you wanted to learn to become nicer, right?”

Blueblood rolled his eyes.

*No, you simpleton, I wanted to become a three-layer buttercream-and-lily sponge cake. Of course I wanted to become nicer, I’m not hanging around this mudhole of a town for no reason.*

Swallowing the thought back, he gave an irritated sigh.

"Yes, yes I did."

"Yep you said that. Next thing I know, you're getting in a fight with one of my friends. That's mighty impressive. I thought you'd last at least a full day."

"It is only normal that I be affronted, that crazy mare you call a friend almost caused my untimely death."

"Don't you untimely me! That mare's crashed into about everypony in this here town, and she's never injured anyone."

As she spoke, Applejack slowly moved closer and closer to the prince, speaking louder and louder.

"Accidents happen, and if you think being nice just means being nice when it's convenient for you, you're so far off the track you'd need that compass on your flank just to get back! Sometimes, you have to go farther and be nice even if it's a heap of trouble for you."

Applejack brought her face very close to his, staring him straight in the eyes with a frown that could have scared the leaves off an apple tree. Prince Blueblood stumbled back and stuttered.

"But... But..."

"Don't bother, I don't need to hear it. You just take some time to think about it, and my brother and I'll see you tomorrow on the farm."

Without a word, Applejack trotted away, ignoring the Prince's self-righteous pleas. Shocked at the turn of events, Blueblood simply stood there, not entirely managing to process the scene that had unfolded. His body was burning with irritation, his muscles were sore from the work, and his legs were feeling cold and wet. In retrospect, perhaps stepping out of that puddle should have been his first course of action.

With a resigned sigh, the unicorn trotted back to his hotel room for a second bath and grooming.

~~~

An hour later, Prince Blueblood was out on the streets again. Princess Luna had long ago heaved the moon into the sky and decorated the darkness with a generous sprinkling of bright stars, shining for all to admire despite the cloudy cover. The main street of Ponyville was dimly lit by a series of lampposts, giving the town a quiet and relaxed mood. The pavement sparkled in the moonlight, slick with rainwater.

The songbirds had gone to sleep, having passed the work of creating a musical ambiance on to their nightly counterparts, the crickets.

The royal unicorn was troubled. For a moment, everything had appeared so easy. Yet, it had only taken one chance encounter for everything to crumble.

What is it I'm supposed to do, then? I should be nice, of course, but I can't just let everyone trample over me! Where's the balance? What should I-

His train of thought was interrupted when his stomach gave a rumbling noise the likes of which he had rarely heard. Having had to redo his grooming, he was running quite late for his usual dinner time. Perhaps he would do better to find a simpler meal than his usual five-star fare.

Suddenly, the sweetest of smells, the perfume of fresh dough and sugar, caught his nostrils. Of course, in a small town such as this one, a visitor was more likely to find regular pastries than the sort of fine delicacies Blueblood was used to, but at this point, he didn't care. He just wanted something tasty.

The building soon came into view. It was a rather large shop, brightly colored and decorated to look as though it had been garnished and frosted like a giant gingerbread house. An enormous cupcake crowned its roof. Blueblood shuddered at the memory of his last encounter with a pastry that large.

Still enchanted by the smell, the prince pushed the door open. The interior of the boutique matched the outside perfectly, with candy stripes

and fixtures of falsified chocolate adorning every nook and cranny. A joyful chime accompanied his entrance, as a middle-aged earth pony mare came into view. Her colorful display of a blue coat and a rose-colored mane could only try to rival the sweetness of her tone.

"Welcome to Sugar Cube Corner, where life is always sweet! How may I help you today?"

Prince Blueblood politely returned her smile.

"Thank you very much, madam. If it's no problem, I'd like to browse for a moment. I'm not quite sure yet what strikes my fancy."

"Oh, of course, no problem. Would you like some green tea while you look? It's only one bit for a cup."

"Ah, that sounds exquisite, thank you very much."

Prince Blueblood focused for a moment and levitated a single golden coin over to the counter. Ms. Cake carefully grabbed the coin out of the air and left it in the cash register, then busied herself with getting a fresh cup of tea ready.

Blueblood glanced over the display of fresh pastries, eyeing the common fare with slight disdain. This was all too ordinary. He slowly scanned across the display, but nothing struck his fancy. Finally, the display's lighting shone to him like the most beautiful ray of morning sun, as his eyes set on a particularly interesting morsel.

"Oooo!", Blueblood exulted. "Are those chocolate éclairs I see before me?"

Ms. Cake came back, setting a piping hot cup of tea onto the counter.

"Why, yes it is. I see you have an eye for fine pastry. They're quite the trouble to make, but they're worth every ounce of effort. Would you like one?"

A hoofful of golden coins hovered over to Ms. Cake, stopping a comfortable distance in front of her for her to seize.

“That would be wonderful, thank you very much.”

With a polite bow, Prince Blueblood levitated the tea and pastry over to a small coffee table in a quiet corner of the boutique and sat down on one of the very comfortable cushions that had been provided for the Corner’s prized customers.

Unlike what he had expected from such a small town bakery, the pastry was exquisite, and the tea rich in flavor. He quickly made his way through a third of the pastry at the behest of his growling stomach, before reminding himself of his manners.

Soon, as he was approaching the end of his snack, the tinkling of the door chimes could be heard. Two ponies walked in. In the lead, an excited unicorn filly almost bounced into the bakery. Following behind her was a pegasus mare, an empty pair of mailbags resting on her back.

The filly had a purplish-gray coat and a light blond mane, and her tiny horn sparkled in the light. A large smile livened up her face. She was simply glowing with joy. The mare’s coat was completely gray, and her mane matched that of the filly. Most likely, the two of them were mother and daughter. As she stooped to look over the displayed wares, one of her eyes slowly lost focus and drifted off, resting its gaze somewhere on the ceiling. Prince Blueblood paid little attention to that fact. He had met other ponies suffering from a lazy eye before, one of whom was in fact his prized butler. Such a purely physical trait didn’t even register in his judgement, because, really, what could Ditzzy Doo do about it? Unlike a bad choice of manecut or clothing, a lazy eye was something one was born with, not something one could change.

“Hi Mrs. Cake!”

“H-hello, Mrs. Cake. H-how are you today?”

Prince Blueblood couldn’t help but notice the slight stuttering. Surely, some common cause was at the root of the mare’s lazy eye and speech issues. Prince Blueblood judged it better not to pry.

“Ditzy and Dinky Doo, how nice to see you two tonight! I’m very well, thank you. Shall I get you your usual?”

The two gray ponies nodded in unison, and Mrs. Cake set herself to work, soon producing a tray holding a pair of blueberry muffins, a small mug of coffee, and a large glass of milk.

“That’ll be eight bits, please.”

Ditzy nodded, and set down her mailbag, opening the zipper on one of the smaller pouches, and digging inside. Quickly, her smile turned into a confused frown, as she frantically began tearing through every compartment of the bags.

“Mommy, is something wrong?”

Ditzy was silent for a moment.

“I t-think I left my money at home.”

“Aww...”

The filly’s excited smile soon turning into a sorrowful grimace. Her mother looked completely ashamed at the consequences of her distraction, her head hanging low. Mrs. Cake was just about to speak up when a voice made itself known from a corner of the shop.

“Ahem, if I may...”

The tinkling of coins on glass resounded for a moment, and it took a few seconds for the mares and the filly to comprehend what had happened. Prince Blueblood put away his satchel with a smile on his face.

The glowing smiles and thanks that the duo soon offered made everything clear to him. The words that had left him confused slowly came into order and harmony.

“If you think being nice just means being nice when it’s convenient for you, you’re so far off the track you’d need that compass on your flank just

to get back. Sometimes, you have to go farther and be nice even if it's a heap of trouble for you."

"Stick around town for a while; make an effort to be nice to everypony. I reckon it'll be an effort at first, but it'll get easier as you go."

Having finished his snack, Prince Blueblood bowed to Mrs. Cake and stepped out of the boutique, taking a moment to smile back to the filly and her mother.

"Now, Dinky, w-what do we say to the nice stallion?"

"Thank you, mister!"

Blueblood owned many gems, and several priceless pieces of art lined the halls of his luxury home in Canterlot. However, none of them, no matter how precious, could possibly ever contend with the smile the young unicorn gave him.

~~~

That night, Blueblood slept peacefully, remembering the gleaming smiles of the two ponies he had helped. He felt reinvigorated, confident. He could do this. Improvement was in reach. He was unstoppable.



# Chapter 4

## To Look Back at One's Hoofprints

The loud crowing of a rooster awoke Big Macintosh. He stood up from his large bed and stretched, slowly doing away with the sleepiness that ran through his limbs. A smile on his face, he descended the stairs that led to and from the upper floor. The wooden stairway greeted him with a familiar series of creaks. The house was very quiet. Unsurprisingly, he was the first to wake up.

The Apple Family's home was humble but comfortable, built of rustic wood and perseverance. It was decorated simply, but offered a warm welcome. The stallion nudged a few windows wide open, feeling the crisp morning air slowly flow through the house. He took a deep breath. Oak and apples; he could never tire of that smell.

As usual, he checked on his grandmother. She was sleeping peacefully. Although the elderly mare was in good health for her age, her grandson couldn't help but be worried. Every morning, he was relieved that nothing had happened during the night.

With that brief moment of worry set aside, Big Macintosh headed to the kitchen to get breakfast ready. A few minutes later, the smell of warm oatmeal and apples wafted through the house, and the sound of hooves against hardwood could be heard resonating.

"Mornin', big bro," Applejack called out from the top of the stairs as she left the room she shared with the youngest of the Apple siblings. She took a deep, eager sniff of the delicious scent. "Apple and cinnamon oatmeal. Ain't nothin' quite like it."

"Eeyup. Apple Bloom awake yet?" Big Macintosh asked as he ladled up a generous portion of the warm breakfast for his sister.

"Yep. I tried to get her up, but you know how she is. 'Five more minutes.'"

"You're sportin' some serious bedmane there, sis."

With a chuckle, Applejack swiped the bowl from his hooves and grabbed a spoon on her way to the table. She sat down at her usual place and gulped down a heaping spoonful.

“Impeccable cookin’ as usual. So, think Blueblood will be coming again today?”

Big Macintosh served himself a generous portion before joining her.

“Hah, ain’t got a clue. He was along with it yesterday, but who knows what’ll happen. I’ve got a little something planned for him if he comes.”

“Huh. And what might that be?”

A smile traced itself on Macintosh’s face.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

The quick taps of small hooves against hardwood echoed through the house, and a young filly’s voice could be heard.

“Mornin’ big bro! Mornin’ big sis!”

Apple Bloom all but galloped down the stairs, drawing a little ire from Applejack.

“Apple Bloom, what did I tell you about runnin’ and shoutin’ in the morning?”

The filly skidded to a stop, suddenly looking downtrodden.

“You said I should be careful not to wake grandma. I’m sorry for forgetting.”

She was quickly cheered up by a hoof on her shoulder and a smile from her sister.

“It’s okay Apple Bloom, I know how excited you get when you’re going to see your friends. C’mon, breakfast’s waitin’ for you.”

Big Macintosh chuckled as he served a third bowl of oatmeal.

“I know another filly who was the same at your age. Ain’t that right, Applejack?”

As the two sisters shared a giggle, Applejack led her sister back to the table where a steaming bowl of oatmeal awaited the filly. With the three siblings finally gathered at the table, Big Macintosh turned his attention to Apple Bloom.

“Say, Apple Bloom, are you Crusaders still gathering them cutie mark stories? I think I’ve got a pony you three might be interested in meetin’...”

~~~

Blueblood hummed to himself as he happily cantered towards Sweet Apple Acres. Carrying his borrowed work clothes and some hygiene supplies in his saddlebags, Blueblood took great care to avoid the many puddles that littered the pavement.

Big Macintosh had requested that the royal turn up early that day. At first, Prince Blueblood had been rather averse to the idea of rising early. However, yesterday’s encounter at the bakery had proven Macintosh’s advice to be wise and fruitful.

Two familiar voices caught his attention in the distance, and a pair of familiar fillies came rushing by.

“Hurry up, Diamond Tiara! Otherwise we’ll be late and Ms. Manners will shout at us!”

“You hurry up! I’m already going as fast as I can! Whose stupid idea was it to schedule etiquette class on Saturday morning, anyway?”

“Hey look! It’s Prince Blueblood!”

The two fillies ran by him, not pausing their gallop. If their teacher was anything like the matronly mare that had taught him at Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns, the threat of detention hovering over their heads was likely the driving force behind their hooves.

“Hi, Prince Blueblood!”, their two voices rang in unison.

“Hello, girls! Don’t be late now! Oh no! Wait! Watch ou-”

There was a massive splash as the two schoolgirls ran straight into an enormous puddle. In unison, the two of them whined.

“Aww... no!”

“What do we do now, Diamond Tiara? Miss Manners will go crazy if we show up like this!”

Those poor fillies... It'd be a shame for them to arrive so soaked and dirty to their etiquette classes. What are they going to do now?

When his eyes met his own reflection in a nearby puddle, Prince Blueblood rolled his eyes at his own train of thought.

Right. Unicorn. Experienced in grooming. No problem.

He approached the two fillies, floating a brush and a towel out of his saddlebags.

“Need a helping hoof, girls?”

Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon answered with a shameful nod. Fortunately, neither of them had been wearing a dress or other elaborate clothing, so getting the two of them back to proper appearances would be a cinch. A few seconds and a quick whirl of magic later, their coats and manes were as clean and dry as ever.

With thanks and a pair of grateful smiles, the two fillies vanished in the distance, giggling between themselves at their good luck.

Congratulating himself on a job well done, Prince Blueblood quickened his pace. It would be unseemly of him to be late, after all.

~~~

Well on his way to Sweet Apple Acres, Prince Blueblood had traded his usual relaxed walk for a more eager trot. Of course, he still abhorred the work, and he was monstrously sore in some areas. However, Big Macintosh's teachings having been as fruitful as his orchard, Blueblood couldn't help but be curious to find out more.

He was invincible. He had his work clothes to protect him from the dirt, his morale was still heightened from helping the distinguished fillies, and the smell of the blooming trees was invigorating. He would get to the farm, work like an honest pony and become the stallion he should have always been. Nothing could stop him. Nothing at all.

Nothing except the sight that awaited him when he got a clear view of the orchard. Mud. So much mud. Entire acres of mud. Filthy Mud Acres, they should have called the place.

“How preposterous! How ridiculous, how outrageous, how... utterly absurd! Confound all of this mud!”

The bulk of his frustration having been vented, Prince Blueblood let out a discouraged sigh, before resuming the fateful walk to his muddy nightmare.

At the gate to Sweet Apple Acres, he found Big Macintosh waiting for him.

“Hey, Blueblood. Glad you came back. Was wonderin’ if you’d show up.”

Swallowing his nervousness, Prince Blueblood stood firm. He was here to learn, after all. Hopefully, he’d be able to get more good advice that would pay off like yesterday’s.

“I... wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

The embellishment was obvious, but Big Macintosh took it in stride. Turning back towards the farmhouse, he motioned for Blueblood to follow him.

“By the way, there’s a couple ponies here who would like to meet you.”

“Oh? Who might they be?”

A strange buzzing noise could be heard in the distance, and three young voices pulverized the silence into submission.

“CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS WELCOME PARTY! YAY!”

Before Blueblood could even open his mouth to complain about the excessive loudness and shouting, a small wagon drifted to a stop in front of him, spraying his legs with gravel and dirt. Startled, he stumbled back.

*Would these fillies be careful? That is not acceptable conduct for children.*

They were all approximately the same age, three cheerful schoolfillies. Each of them was clad in a roughly sewn cape of red and gold fabric. The

shape of a golden pony rearing up on a blue shield background was proudly displayed, though its meaning was unknown to him.

The first was a young white unicorn with a bright smile and emerald green eyes. Her elegant pink and purple mane displayed a certain knowledge of grooming. She slowly disembarked from the wagon, her legs a little wobbly. The abrupt stop had almost sent her tumbling over the stop of the wagon. Of the three, she definitely was the most presentable.

“Scootaloo, think you could try to stop a little softer next time? You almost sent me flying into the mud. Aren’t you supposed to be the pegasus here?”

Blueblood’s attention turned to the second filly. She was an orange pegasus with a violet mane, rough and unkempt, in a rather coltish cut. Had her wings really been making all that noise? Clearly, she would be a very strong flier one day. However, she very much could have benefitted from better grooming. It was unseemly for a girl her age to take so little care of her appearance. She reminded him of the pegasus he had had a run-in with the previous day- brash and overconfident.

“Sorry, Sweetie Belle. Didn’t mean to scare you, just got carried away.”

The third filly giggled.

“Oh, don’t be such a scaredy cat, Sweetie Belle, that was so much fun!”

Her accent was a dead ringer for Big Macintosh’s. This could only be the Apple Bloom that the farmer had mentioned yesterday. For a farmer filly, she looked well-groomed. Her red mane and her yellow coat were brushed with great care and the large pink bow that adorned her head certainly suited her well. In a single leap, she hopped out of the wagon and landed between her friends.

“I am not a scaredy cat! I just don’t want to get hurt!”

Sweetie Belle gave her friend an indignant glare. Blueblood fully empathized. He’d seen her almost tumble out of the cart, and indeed, she could have gotten hurt.

Big Macintosh stepped past the beleaguered Prince Blueblood, giving the fillies an admonishing glance.

“You three should really be careful with that thing, otherwise you might wind up hurtin’ yourselves... or somepony else.”

*Okay, at least I guess they’re in good hooves for their misbehavior. Wear a mask, Blueblood. Wear a mask. They’re just fillies; you were a rambunctious colt too.*

Prince Blueblood forced his anger back, and did his best to smile in spite of his annoyance.

“So, who might these three mystery damsels be?”

Pridefully, Apple Bloom seized her chance.

“I’m Apple Bloom, this is Sweetie Belle-”

“Hi!”

“-and this is Scootaloo.”

“The one and only!”

“Together we are...” the three fillies shouted in harmony as they assumed dramatic poses. Clearly, this was an act they were familiar with. “The Cutie Mark Crusaders!”

Noting the prince’s apparent confusion, Big Macintosh was quick to explain the fillies’ goal and their predilection for adventuring and for the gathering of Cutie Mark stories. Noticing that the Crusaders were distracted by the approach of a friendly Winona, the farmer seized the moment to whisper some very important words.

“Sweetie Belle’s Rarity’s little sister. Thought you’d like to know.”

Taking a mental note to ensure he would make a good impression on his love interest’s sister, Prince Blueblood couldn’t help but smile at the fillies’ enthusiasm about their quest. Despite their unruliness, there was something somewhat endearing about their antics. He recalled himself, as a young colt, having had great difficulties obtaining his Cutie Mark, due to the very... sheltering nature of his mother.

“Your quest is a very noble one, Cutie Mark Crusaders. I am told that you wish to seek my help? How may this unicorn be of use?”

The foals stood still for a moment, giving him a confused look as his words slowly registered. From what information they had recieved about Prince Blueblood, they had not expected him to be so interested in helping.

"You talk funny," Scootaloo noted, to Big Macintosh's great amusement. Blueblood stood surprised for a moment, irritated. Struggling to not drop an unkind word, Blueblood slowly paced through his mind.

*Wear a mask, Blueblood. Wear a mask. She's not used to meeting people of your stature, and your manner of speaking caught her by surprise, it's all.*

"Scootaloo! That's not a very nice thing to say," Sweetie Belle noted. "Sorry, Prince Blueblood. Scootaloo can be kind of silly sometimes."

"It's..." Prince Blueblood paused for a moment, taking a deep breath. "...quite alright. Now then, if we may return to the subject at hoof..."

With one of her hooves still occupied with petting the family dog, Apple Bloom snapped to attention, finally asking the question that had been tantalizing the Cutie Mark Crusaders since that morning.

"Well, actually, Prince Blueblood, we were kind of wonderin' how you got your Cutie Mark. We've been askin' lots of ponies, but we've never had a chance to ask a noble before. Big Macintosh told us we might learn somethin' from it."

The farmer lapsed into a look of surprise. Clearly, he hadn't expected that his little set up would make itself so apparent. Prince Blueblood simply laughed. Though the little pegasus had gotten rather strongly on his nerves, he couldn't help but enjoy the attention.

Also, the longer he could stay away from all that mud, the better.

"So, you're the one who put them up to this, Macintosh? Is this supposed to be a hidden lesson for me?"

"Hah," the farmer chuckled, "just figured you and them both might learn somethin' from reflectin' on a story. It's like Granny always told me: if you don't stop to look at your hoofprints now and then, you'll never know if you're really goin' straight."



“Wise words, Macintosh. Wise words indeed. Now then, perhaps we should move to somewhere more comfortable. I’m afraid this isn’t the shortest of stories...”

~~~

Moments later, five ponies and a dog had gathered back at the living room of the old farmhouse. By now, Applejack was out working the fields. They were soon joined by an elderly mare, whom Big Macintosh was quick to introduce as Granny Smith. She offered a warm smile but few words, and was content with only receiving the same from the prince.

The room fell silent, with only the fireplace’s crackling and the birds chirping melodiously outside to break the silence.

“Now then, as we were saying. It all started when I was but a young colt...”

~~~

*Three blank-flanked foals cheerfully galloped through the woodland preserves of Canterlot Ridge, basking in their stolen freedom. Every now and then, some adventure would tickle their fancy and they would flee from the stuffiness of Canterlot’s high-class life for a few hours.*

*Their cheerful laughter livened up the quiet forest, and soon, animals were partaking in their joy. The birds chirped along with them, and the occasional rabbit or squirrel poked its head out of a burrow or a hollow tree to say hi.*

*Leading the pack was the young Prince Blueblood, his long golden mane and tail waving in the wind behind him. For once, he got to exit the house without his mother saddling him with unnecessary amounts of accessories, and he was enjoying the glory of freedom, and his joy was clearly reflected in his sky-blue eyes. His first growth spurt had been rather kind to him, and he galloped in elegant yet powerful bursts.*

*To his left, a pegasus filly of the deepest violet kept up with him with a peculiar mix of elegance and recklessness, her fluttering wings occasionally carrying her for short bursts of low flight before her legs resumed their course. She was in the process of learning to fly, and enjoying every minute of it. Her unruly red mane, no longer held tight in a constricting braid, blazed behind her. She wanted to reach their*

*destinations before her companions, that much was obvious in her deep green eyes. Much like Blueblood, she was entering adolescent age, and her own growth had been rather kind as well.*

*Lady Amethyst was, first and foremost, his closest confidante. They had met, two years ago, at a social function held by Blueblood's mother, and the two had soon become fast friends, perhaps more. Far from being opposed to their relationship, their parents had began not so secretly holding plans of arranged marriage. Amethyst's family stood to gain the presence of a true descendant of Princess Celestia, and Blueblood's mother had reasoned that such a marriage would reflect well on her own family.*

*At the Prince's right, a second colt stood; a young earth pony by the name of Apricot. Unlike his two companions, he was no noblecolt. Apricot was the son of a gardener who worked for various rich homeowners across Canterlot, one of which was Blueblood's mother. The duchess simply loathed the young commoner, who she felt would be a terrible influence upon her son, but Blueblood refused to heed her threats. Apricot was a loyal friend, and most of all, entertaining. Used to being told to sit quietly and not bother the aristocrats, he cherished these moments of play, expending amounts of energy that even his companions often had trouble matching, despite their more advanced development. Apricot was a late bloomer, and though he shared the same age as his two friends, he looked much younger.*

*He kept up with Blueblood's gallop and Amethyst's bursts of flight through some impressive leaps of his own, bounding like a gazelle more than running. His short green mane bounced wildly as he hopped, alternately rising to the sky, wildly waving in the wind and coming to crash against his neck. His peach coat was a blur and his large hazel eyes frenetically shifted from point to point, taking in all the marvels of the forest. Although he had often visited Canterlot Ridge, its marvels never ceased to amaze him.*

*In their stampede, they didn't hear the rustling of the fallen leaves some distance away, nor the steps of paws and claws that soon followed.*

*Soon, they broke to a halt when they reached their destination: the Trickle. A rather strong misnomer, the Trickle was a famous spot amongst the more rambunctious foals of the city. There, a small waterfall dove from the summit of Mount Canterlot, splashing into a moderately shallow basin*

*before trickling off through a stream and down the rest of the mountain side. If you asked almost any foal in the city, they would tell you it was an awesome swimming spot that their parents were unaware of. If you asked almost any parent, it was a nostalgic area that they let their foals enjoy much as they had in their youth.*

*As the three of them were preparing to take the first dive, they were interrupted by the sound of steps in the fallen leaves. A defiant male voice rang out.*

*“Well, well, well, what do we have here? I spy with my little eye three foals with more money than common sense.”*

*Blueblood looked up at the stranger, a young gryphon, probably one or two years older than them. His coloration was similar to that of any other gryphon, brown with white feathers, and his claws were just as threatening. Red markings decorated his menacing eyes and the tips of his short fringe. He stood tall, his piercing stare greedily locked on to the small pile of discarded accessories some hooves away from the edge of the water; three satchels of bits, Blueblood’s silver watch, Amethyst’s bejeweled bracelet and her golden earrings.*

*Immediately standing at attention, Blueblood and Amethyst faced the gryphon, while the less confident Apricot took place behind them, somewhat nervous. Blueblood quickly sized up the situation. The bandit might have been somewhat larger than them, but they had strength in numbers. The gryphon’s claws looked somewhat soft and stubby and one of them was broken. He was far from being an adult. He would have strength over them, but he most likely was a brutish, sloppy fighter. Amethyst herself was quite fast, and if Apricot’s work on the peach tree Blueblood’s mother had in the backyard was anything to judge by, the young colt could buck up with the best of their age. As for Prince Blueblood, his mother had ensured that he had the means to defend himself. He was without rival in his horn fencing classes. That gryphon had no idea what he was getting into.*

*Amethyst was the first to speak up, taking a step forward and flaring her wings for added impact:*

*“You think you’re all that with your claws and beak, but you don’t scare us!”*

*Blueblood soon worked up the courage to join in her jeering, himself taking a step, his horn glinting in the sunlight.*

*“Go back to your badlands, gryphon! This is no place for the likes of you!”*

*Somewhat hesitant, Apricot took a clue from his friends’ bravado, soon standing tall and holding himself ready.*

*“Hah. You foals think you’re so brave, huh?”*

*Without any warning, the gryphon suddenly lunged forward, aiming his right talon straight at the young unicorn colt. A straight-up attack, somewhat sloppy; they were being taken lightly. Thanks to a reflex forged from two years of intensive horn fencing classes, Prince Blueblood parried the strike with the tip of his horn, knocking away the claws, only to be knocked aside himself by a brutal kick.*

*“Nice try there, loser!”*

*Wincing in pain, Blueblood rose back to his hooves, somewhat dazed, taking in the scene. The gryphon had effortlessly knocked Amethyst out of her attempted diving charge, and was now advancing menacingly towards Apricot, a terrible gleam in his eyes.*

*“What about you? Are you going to pick a fight with me too? Hah! You’re so tiny! You couldn’t hit a tree if I threw you at it!”*

*“Y- you don’t scare me, you big meanie!”*

*Slowly moving back as the avian walked towards him, Apricot glanced around with fear in his eyes, looking for an escape path. To his assailant’s right, he noticed Blueblood whispering a few words to Amethyst, before charging back towards the bandit.*

*Taking off to the left, Amethyst taunted the gryphon, nodding for Apricot to move right.*

*“Hey! Feathers for brains! I bet you can’t catch me!”*

*The violet filly flew straight by her foe, slapping him behind the head with her wing as she sped by. He took a wild swipe at her but missed entirely due to her speed and his own clumsiness. Standing up at last, Blueblood*

*scraped his hoof against the ground and charged at him, aiming his horn straight for the gryphon's ribs.*

*"Hah! Obvious distraction, and even more obvious charge! You foals are useless!"*

*The bandit stood up on his hindlegs, lifting his claws high, ready to bring them down on the unicorn foal, expecting to counter the ridiculous attack. Expecting.*

*Shouting over the thunder of his hooves, Blueblood called out to his friend.*

*"Apricot! Buck him!"*

*"What? Oh! Okay! Heeee-yah!"*

*Startled, the gryphon didn't know how to react and nearly toppled over when a pair of hooves struck him right in the rear. It became obvious that Apricot had slipped out of his mind. He could barely keep from tumbling forwards, but soon managed to catch himself, still on his hind legs.*

*"Hah! Can't knock me down so easily!"*

*He had spoken too soon, forgetting Blueblood's charge in his surprise. The unicorn foal dove into his legs at the last second, knocking him off balance and flipping him onto his stomach. He landed with a thundering crash.*

*"Pony Pile!"*

*The filly, seeing the scene develop, noticed the perfect opportunity and threw herself on the gryphon's back, pinning his wings. Blueblood and Apricot saw the occasion, both tossing themselves at him. The combined weight of three young ponies was too much for the thief, and he could do no more than thrash about, trying to free himself.*

*Over his indignant shouts, the foals began discussing, pondering their curious situation. They couldn't just get off him, he'd attack again.*

*"Okay, everypony. Get ready. On my signal, Amethyst, grab the jewelry, and we'll all run back to town. Ready?"*

*"Ready."*

*“Ready.”*

*“Go!”*

*The foals dashed off in a conjoined effort, the sheer force of their taking off knocking the wind out of the gryphon. He tried to run after them, but his larger bulk and his body suited more for flight than ground made him unable to catch up with them. He could only pitifully watch his prey vanish in the distance and grumble at the precious objects he had come so close to swiping for himself.*

~~~

“Hahaha! Did you two see the look on his face when Blueblood knocked him off his paws? That was hilarious!” Amethyst was laying on her back, struggling for breath through waves of laughter.

“I can’t believe I managed to buck him like that! It’s all thanks to you guys!”

“That was fantastic, you two! That kick he gave me... really hurt though. I hope it didn’t leave a mark on my...”

Blueblood couldn’t help but squeal cheerfully when he realised that their adventure had indeed left a mark on his flank. However, far from a bruise, it was an entirely different kind of mark; a Cutie Mark.

~~~

*“... and on that day, I finally knew who I was meant to be. You see, this mark is the sigil of the Blueblood Family. I have been told that my father bore it, as did his father before him, and his father before him, and so on, ever since my great great great... well you get the point... great grandfather first earned his Cutie Mark. The compass stands for leading others in the right direction, leading the way through example.”*

*“What a terrific story! That was really something else! I especially liked the part where you and your friends beat the gryphon all like ‘Whoosh!’ and ‘Bang!’ and ‘Pow!’ I met a gryphon once, she was pretty much like the one you described. Well except she was a girl and she has purple feathers, but then red, purple, what’s the difference really? Oh, and...”*

*Blueblood could only stare, dumbstruck, at the new pony that had suddenly appeared in his perception. Lost in his recounting, he had missed*

the entrance of two new ponies in the room. The first one was Applejack, the farmer mare whom he clearly remembered, but the other one was unknown to him. She was of a shocking pink color, bearing an unruly frizzled mane of gigantic proportions, and an absurd tail to match it. The prince stuttered for a moment, attempting to comprehend what was happening, as the mare oozed words and onomatopoeias from every point of her existence.

“Pinkie Pie, I think you’re weirdin’ out our guest here.”

Applejack prodded her friend in the ribs with her elbow to reinforce her hinting.

“Oh! Sorry,” Pinkie giggled. “I get so excited when I meet new ponies, and even more so when I hear stories like this one.” She paused for a moment, blinking twice, before a realisation struck her. “Oh! A new pony! Of course! This calls for a party!”

Noting Blueblood suddenly looked like a rabbit staring at the lantern of a speeding carriage, Applejack reeled her friend in.

“Pinkie, I really don’t think that’s a good idea right now. Plus, you promised me you’d help with getting the barn cleaned up.”

“Oh! You’re right! I’d never break a promise to you... or to anyone else, really! Okie dokie lokie, let’s go!”

Silently thanking Celestia that she wouldn’t have to deal with Pinkie in yet another party craze, Applejack led Pinkie Pie outside, where they disappeared into the large barn.

Blueblood didn’t know how to react but stare, mouth agape. Despite the unusual happenings, everyone else was unfazed.

“What... was all this madness about?”

Big Macintosh chuckled, rising from the sofa he had been occupying.

“That’s Pinkie Pie, one of Applejack’s friends. Don’t try to understand. Trust me, it’s better that way.”

There was an awkward, confused pause.

“What a strange pony.”

“That was such an awesome story! You guys really defeated a gryphon? Wow!”

Scotaloo now looked at the prince admiringly, in sheer contrast to the indifferent attitude she had given him earlier. The other two fillies were quick to agree.

“Of course! A pony leadin’ Cutie Mark! Maybe we could get one?”

Applebloom was ready to dash for the door, but Sweetie Belle was hesitant.

“Well... how would we get one like that? I mean, fighting a bandit would be dangerous. Where would we even find a bandit in the first place?”

Blueblood gave them a charitable, if somewhat forced smile. It would reflect badly on him if any of them were to be injured in some reckless attempt at getting their Cutie Marks like he’d gotten his.

“Now, now, girls, don’t you go rushing into anything reckless. We only had to fight him off because there was no other option for us, and I would definitely have gotten my Cutie Mark one way or another.”

Big Macintosh was quick to agree.

“Apple Bloom, don’t I catch you doin’ anything dangerous like that. I’m sure you’ll be able to figure out plenty of other ways to find that Cutie Mark, if it’s what yours turns out to be.”

Apple Bloom gave her brother a disappointed yet resigned look.

“Aw... fine. C’mon, crusaders! We’ve got some crusading to do!”

With a united shout, the fillies ran off, prompting a gentle and amused smile from the elderly pony.

“CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS PONY LEADERS, YAY!”

Prince Blueblood rolled his eyes, his annoyance being somewhat of a source of amusement to Big Macintosh, who couldn’t suppress a smirk.

“Always so loud, aren they?”

“Eeyup. Just means they liked your story, though. Thanks for humorin’ the foals; lotsa ponies just try to ignore ‘em.”



"Ignore those three? That sounds like a pretty difficult task, now that you mention it."

"You're a witty one, Blueblood, y'know that? C'mon, we've got some work to do."

"Right."

*Okay, Blueblood, you can do this. You went through the same yesterday, and you turned out fine, if somewhat sore. Today shouldn't be any wor- right. Mud.*

The horrific memories came back. The spring showers. The storm. The mud. So much mud. They'd have to work in the mud. It wasn't something the boots and poncho could protect him against. He felt his legs shaking under him.

"So... What shall we be working on today? Ploughing another field? Planting some manner of vegetable?"

"Actually, I was thinking we'd go and help my sister and her friend with puttin' some order back in the barn."

The prince blinked twice, as his mind gradually wrapped itself around the news. When he caught on, Prince Blueblood burst into cheerful laughter, leaving his host baffled.

"By the sky and the sun! By the moon and the stars! There is justice in this world after all!"

~~~

Chapter 5

The Turning Point

“I cannot say it enough; I am so thankful that you two agreed to join me today. Much as I told you earlier, I’ve been simply beside myself about Prince Blueblood being in Ponyville... Oh, this stress is doing my poor, poor body a serious number!”

Rarity had invited Twilight Sparkle and Fluttershy to join her for an afternoon treatment at the spa. Thanks to the fashionista’s influence as a frequent customer, they had been able to secure a quiet jacuzzi bath all for themselves.

The air was warm and comforting as they entered the dimly-lit room. The twirling and bubbling water had been infused with jasmine, leaving the room perfumed with its enthralling smell. The walls of the small bathing area were decorated with an ornate ceramic mosaic depicting a field of colorful flowers. The air was almost dripping with humidity, yet it offered a comforting embrace of warmth instead of a sweltering, strangling heat. All in all, it was a fortress of relaxation and rest, a barrier against the stresses of the outside world.

“I should be the one thanking you, Rarity. I could never afford this place by myself.”

Though Twilight Sparkle did receive a salary for her caretaking of the Ponyville library, she was by no means rich; not to mention that most of her leisure budget tended to go up in dragon flames and teleport straight to mail-order bookstores all over Equestria. While Celestia had often offered to fund her studies, Twilight had vehemently refused every time.

Fluttershy nodded in agreement as she slowly climbed into the upraised bath. She gave a contented sigh, feeling the warm water envelop her.

“Twilight’s right. Thank you, Rarity.”

As the two unicorns sat down, Fluttershy paused for a moment, closing her eyes and frowning in deep thought.

“What did you want to talk to us about? I mean, um, I know you mentioned Prince Blueblood being in town, but what about him?”

Rarity was silent for a moment, letting the warm bath wash and massage all of her problems away. She chewed on her words for a moment. Her answer had to be perfect.

“That is exactly what I’ve been wondering, darling. What about him? A stallion in town, on a personal quest to better himself, all for my sake... I can’t make heads or tails of this. I don’t know how to feel. Should I be flattered or scared? Should I give him a chance? What if he turns out to be the same lout I saw at the gala? On the other hoof, what if he becomes the Prince Charming I’ve dreamed of for so long? What is a lady to do?

“I can’t just leave him in hesitation, can I? With everything he’s been doing in my name, what would I be if I tried to ignore the whole thing? I agreed to let Applejack’s brother help him out, which, I guess, is pretty generous of me, but at some point, I’ll have to get involved... isn’t it so?

“Oh, girls, I don’t know what to do with myself anymore. Just look at me. I’m the one who’s supposed to be turning heads, and then this royal colt comes into town, and leaves mine spinning with questions! This is Discord all over again!”

Rarity dramatically slumped against the edge of the bath, visibly tired from her sudden outburst. There was a pause, as Twilight Sparkle and Fluttershy processed Rarity’s barrage of doubts and questions.

Twilight Sparkle was quick to notice Fluttershy biting her lower lip and sinking down to the bottom of her muzzle. At least she still looked like she was managing to relax, as evidenced by her wings floating limply in the water.

The violet unicorn sighed and adjusted her position, lowering herself further into the water and leaning back against the side of the jacuzzi. She gave a soft sigh.

“That’s... an awful lot of questions, Rarity. Let’s just take this logically, one thing at a time. Trying to answer five questions at once is like trying to read five books at once: It just doesn’t work.”

Twilight hesitated for a moment, noticing the awkward glances she was receiving.

“Trust me, I’ve tried.”

Rarity settled down, taking a deep breath. She let herself sink down to her neck, basking in the feeling of the warm water against her coat.

“You’re all too right, Twilight. I must admit this is all leaving me terribly, terribly shaken. I’ve had colts pine after me before, of course, but I do believe this is the first time one has gone to such lengths. Usually, they just present me with a bouquet of tulips and leave it at that, as though a lady’s heart could be bought with nothing but a fancy snack. Blueblood’s case, however, is different. I simply don’t know what to make of all this dedication...”

Suddenly, a spark seemed to shoot through Rarity’s eyes.

“Of course! Why didn’t I think of this before. Both of you, please tell me, what do you think of this whole story?”

Fluttershy perked up from her relaxed state, offering Rarity a reassuring smile.

“Well... I think, maybe, that it’s good that he’s trying to improve for you. I don’t think it’s really all that odd that he’d come here from Canterlot if he likes you, but on the other hoof, I see why it could bother you. I mean, not that you’d consider yourself too good for him, but, you know, after what he did at the Grand Galloping Gala, it would be understandable if you didn’t want to see him again.”

Twilight was quick to follow suit.

“I haven’t really had much in the way of colts’ affections, so it’s kind of hard for me to judge. That being said, if I remember correctly, the Filly’s Folio of Fantastic Flirtation would probably tell you that Prince Blueblood’s

sudden resolve reflects positively on him, but also that you should make sure it isn't something he's doing dishonestly just to impress you. If you ask me, the best course of action would be to observe the events and get a clearer idea of what's going on before you take a decision. I've got to admit, I'm still kind of surprised at how badly he turned out since the last time I ran into him."

The other two mares gaped at Twilight, surprised. Rarity was quick to press into Twilight's last statement, dramatically flailing a hoof in the air.

"When you last ran into him? You've run into him before, and you didn't warn me about him? Twilight! How could you do this to me?"

Twilight recoiled in surprise, pressing herself against the edge of the tub.

"Rarity! Calm down! I couldn't have known you'd run into him! Back then, he was nothing like the... jerk you encountered. He was well-behaved, educated, and mostly quiet in class, if a little too eager to look good in front of the teacher. We even did some assignments together, and everything went fine."

"But... why didn't you tell me about him earlier? I've been trying to learn more about him for days!"

The heater paused for a moment, as Twilight's annoyance was all the water needed to maintain its temperature.

"I tried to tell you! I've been trying to tell you since he first came to town and you started worrying about him! You wouldn't listen! You were too busy being dramatic!"

Rarity became even paler than her usual white as she suddenly remembered Twilight's words about Prince Blueblood over the last two days. Her voice became mellow again, and she settled back down.

"Twilight, darling! I do believe I owe you some apologies here. I... certainly hope you'll be able to forgive my passing moment of unladylike acrimony."

Still somewhat surprised by her friend's outburst, Twilight slowly settled back down and elbowed Fluttershy, who had taken to hiding her head behind her wings. The frightened pegasus slowly bloomed back into a state of relaxation, listening to the conversation. She had nothing to add.

Placing a hoof on the distraught diva's shoulder, Twilight Sparkle gave a reassuring nod.

"It's alright, Rarity, I know this whole ordeal is pretty trying for you. I accept your apologies."

Bringing a hoof to her chin, Rarity pondered the earlier advice for a moment.

"Thank you very much, Twilight... Where were we... Ah, yes! I must admit there is much merit to the 'wait and see' approach. It would allow me to have a better idea of what to expect from him, as well as give me some time to relax without worrying about all of this. Might I be able to count on you two and the others to let me know if you hear or see anything about him?"

The other two mares nodded in answer, appeasing Rarity's concerns. Almost immediately, her pupils shrank and she suppressed a gasp.

"But, what if he loses interest? Oh, no, no, no, that wouldn't be good at all. What if he believes I'm not paying attention to what he's doing and he just goes home to Canterlot? Then, I'll never know what could have been! I'll forever wonder if, perhaps, he could have become the pony I had first thought him to be! The mere thought of it is horrifying!"

Unfazed by the dramatic unicorn's outburst, Twilight gave an encouraging smile.

"You could always go and talk to him. That would let him know you're at least interested."

Rarity's jaw dropped in horror, as she almost threw herself at Twilight.

"No, no, no, no, a thousand times no! That would be so awkward, so uncomfortable. I am not ready to see him, and he is not ready to see me.

After all, he still has much to learn about dealing with a mare such as I, and I must admit I am rather uncomfortable with the prospect of reliving that fateful evening. An encounter at this point in time simply will not do!”

Softly, Fluttershy displaced Rarity’s hooves from a panicked Twilight’s shoulders.

“Um... Rarity? Maybe you could just leave a note at his hotel room? Then, you wouldn’t have to face him, but you could still let him know about your feelings. I mean... if that’s what you want.”

Sparkling with interest, Rarity gave an elated smile.

“That is a positively brilliant idea, my dear Fluttershy! I’ll write the note tonight, and have it delivered to him tomorrow! Oh, what would I ever do without you?”

Fluttershy blushed at the compliment.

“Oh... it was nothing special really... I only had the idea because...”

Fluttershy dissolved into incomprehensible mumbling, much to Rarity’s disapproval.

“Pardon?”

The pegasus spoke no louder, slowly sinking under the surface. Twilight raised an eyebrow in curiosity, motioning upwards.

“Fluttershy? I think you’ll have to speak up.”

Her muzzle now entirely submerged, a few small bubbles were Fluttershy’s only answer.

The two unicorns awkwardly stared for a moment at the cowering pegasus, until finally she surfaced for air. As her lungs refilled, she couldn’t hold back the words.

“IonlyhadtheideabecauseIgavesomeponyalovenoteyesterday!”

There was a pregnant pause as the revelation sunk in. Twilight Sparkle's muzzle soon cracked into a mischievous grin while Rarity appeared to marvel at the situation.

"Fluttershy's in love! I'm so happy for you!"

"Darling, I beg you, you must tell me all about him! Or is it a her?"

Fluttershy slowly backed herself against the wall of the tub, as the two curious mares slowly edged toward her.

~~~~~

Blueblood and Big Macintosh walked into the barn. It was quite large for a storage area, offering a ground floor and a low-ceiling attic. Despite the large windows, it was somewhat dark and dusty, and it had fallen into disarray over the winter. Tools and equipment were strewn about without a care for order. Most likely, orderliness had fallen to the sidelines during the long rush of applebuck season.

The door had been propped open in order to let some fresh air in. Immediately, two young mares poked their heads out from the second floor, looking down at them. One bore a cowfilly's hat, while the other was graced with a fuchsia mane that seemed to defy the laws of physics and magic alike.

"Hey, big bro, hey Blueblood. You two came to give us a hoof?"

Big Macintosh cracked a smile, nodding towards the disheveled colt clad in the borrowed set of poncho, straw hat and galoshes.

"Eeyup. I didn't have it in me to bring this here prince into the muddy fields."

Prince Blueblood snapped out of his dirt-induced torpor.

"I could have handled it!"

While the pink pony retained her eternal grin, oblivious to the Prince's denial, both farmers gave him a disbelieving stare.



“... Okay. I couldn’t have.”

Pinkie Pie hopped the guard rail of the second floor and landed near Blueblood, using her curly tail as a bouncy landing cushion. The prince could only stare, dumbstruck as she draped a foreleg over his shoulders and flashed him a big smile.

“You silly stallie! No pony here’s gonna laugh at you because you can’t handle some mud. Everypony has their weaknesses! I mean, I always eat way too much sugar, Applejack is the stubbornest Stubborn von Stubbornpants I know, and Big Macintosh still sleeps with-”

“Pinkie! That ain’t the kind of thing you mention in public!”

“Heehee! Sorry, Applejack. Was that supposed to be a secret?”

Big Macintosh gave a relieved sigh.

Prince Blueblood slipped out of Pinkie’s grasp, somewhat startled at the physical contact. He took a deep breath and let it go slowly and calmly.

What is wrong with this mare? Was she raised by rocks? Okay, no matter, no matter. She was only being overly friendly. Keep calm, Blueblood. Keep. Calm.

Unfazed by the madness that was Pinkie Pie, Big Macintosh motioned for Blueblood to follow him.

“Looks like these two fillies have the top floor under wraps, so what do you say we get started on the ground level?”

Blueblood gave the barn a close inspection. It had spent the entire winter closed, and had become the home to a large colony of spiders. Indeed, cobwebs hung from the ceiling and the tools. The Prince shuddered at the sight. Still, thinking back to the ocean of filth that Big Macintosh had called a field, he figured the situation could have been worse.

“I guess so. However... I believe a little magic is called for, here.”

Before Macintosh could react, Blueblood focused deeply.

Let's see... How did this spell work again? Ah, yes!

Bright teal light enveloped the prince's horn, causing the inside of the dimly-lit barn to glow similarly. Soon, the cobwebs gathered together in a single ball, which casually floated out of the window.

"Okay, ready."

Big Macintosh shrugged at the display. He would have discouraged the use of magic for the actual work, but he figured he'd be able to get more cooperation out of the prince if the latter didn't constantly panic at the sticky touch of cobwebs in his coat.

"Okay then. Mind giving me a hoof with these apple baskets? I'll go get the cart."

Prince Blueblood nodded and grabbed a basket with his mouth. He was somewhat bothered by having to handle objects with his mouth rather than his magic, but if Big Macintosh believed it to be important, then he was bound to go along with it. He was still under oath, after all.

For a few hours, the four ponies labored on getting the barn cleared up, making sure the tools were in working order, and putting everything back in its rightful place.

After a while, the work seemed to become mechanical. Grab a tool, bring it to the workshop, clean it, sharpen it if need be, bring it back. Once they had settled into a rhythm, the two stallions began talking. At first, only of general things, like Blueblood's evening the previous day, his encounter with Rainbow Dash and his gift to the Doo family. Soon, however, Big Macintosh asked a question that left Blueblood somewhat surprised.

"Say, Blueblood, your story from earlier's been makin' me wonder..."

"Mhm?"

"What exactly does it mean to you, leadin' ponies?"

Prince Blueblood put down the rake he had been dragging to its proper place. He showed a cringe of confusion.

“What ever do you mean, Big Macintosh?”

Stepping away from the whetstone he had been using to sharpen a pair of shears, Big Macintosh turned towards Blueblood.

“Well, y’see, you told the foals your special talent was about leadin’ ponies, right?”

Prince Blueblood gave an approving mumble around the handle of the rake as he set it down with a pair of shovels and a hoe.

“I haven’t been seeing you do much of anything that resembles leadin’. I mean, that magazine article led you to Rarity, Rarity’s cat led you to the river, Applejack led you to me, I led you to startin’ to get better... well, you get the idea. You seem like you’re more of a follower than a leader, if you ask me.”

Blueblood frowned sourly, his hoof slamming thunderously against the barn’s wooden floor.

“What? That’s preposterous! There is more to leading than simply directing people around oneself. One leads by example, by standing tall and showing a proud, noble allure. One leads by being a beacon of light in the darkness of mediocrity. Most of all, one leads by being proper and chivalrous.”

Big Macintosh kept his composure, unfazed by the prince’s display of indignation.

“Eeyup. Wonder what Rarity would say to that.”

Prince Blueblood stood still for a moment, processing Macintosh’s simple answer. With a gulp, his bravado seemed to melt down in an instant.

“I... see your point. I’ll need to do some thinking on that, I believe.”

Big Macintosh nodded, giving a smile of support.

"I'm not meanin' to tell you what your special talent's about, but it does sound like- Blueblood! Watch out!"

"Huh? Whoa!"

By now, Blueblood was going through the motions mechanically. He backed out of the barn, a shovel held in his mouth. Distracted, he tripped on a stack of firewood. The assembled ponies could only watch in horror as the logs came crashing down, grazing the prince's leg but fortunately otherwise missing him.

The Prince dropped the shovel and fell to the ground, the sharp pain in his leg attracting his attention almost immediately.

Blood. A trickle, a stream, a river, a torrent even, colored his fur all of glistening crimson. He was bleeding. Bleeding his own blood. Sharp pain coursed through his leg, causing him to wince, cringe and recoil. Tears of shock soon formed in his eyes. He couldn't look away. If he looked away, his massive injury would only get worse; he just knew it. He could hear distant echoes, ghostly voices vying for his attention, and yet, they sailed through his mind without finding port.

He saw only his red blood on his white coat. The pure fluid of life on a pristine canvas. Precious red wine spilled on a tablecloth of priceless lace. A single rose losing its petals one by one on a bed of lilies. The traitorous lipstick on the white vest's collar, revealing an affair of the most sordid kind. The blood of the fallen royal guard agonizing on the white snows of Stalliongrad.

Red and white. Red and white. Red and white and pink. Pink?

A shrill voice rang out.

"Bluey? Are you okay? You don't look okay, but then I don't really know how you're like when you're okay so it's really hard to judge. I know everypony in Ponyville, though, and none of them look like that when they're okay. I'm not sure I get why you're all scared like that. It's just an itty bitty little scrape, no? I mean, I don't see any *blue*..."

Distracted from his state of shock, Prince Blueblood stared blankly at the young pink mare. Slowly, his panic turned to incomprehension.

“But... you... I... what? Oh... you thought... Huh?”

Blueblood blinked. He blinked again. Pinkie Pie cracked him an enormous smile, the likes of which no other pony could replicate.

There was an awkward pause.

To the great surprise of everyone involved, Blueblood cracked up. The barn rang with the pure laughter of a stallion free from worry, free to laugh like the colt he once was, free from the constraints of his noble upbringing. The sharp pain of the cut on his leg had been completely forgotten, leaving place to nothing but pure amusement.

It didn't take long for the cheer to catch up with Pinkie, who soon accompanied the prince in his laughter, herself collapsing to the ground in a fit of hilarity.

Watching over the two, Applejack and Big Macintosh shared a chuckle and a smile. Pinkie could cheer up anyone, that much was clear.

~~~

That night, Prince Blueblood arrived at his hotel room tired but in high spirits. He'd managed to last through the entire day of work. When he had left, the barn had seemed twice as spacious as when he had first arrived, clean and orderly.

Fortunately, his wound had turned out to be a very minor affair, and he felt somewhat silly for how far out of proportion he had taken the whole thing.

The two stallions had come to an agreement that it would probably be better if Blueblood took the day off farm work tomorrow. He had some thinking to do, and was also getting rather curious to see more of the town.

Settling down on the luxurious sofa that throned in the hotel room, Blueblood poured himself a glass of wine nectar, purchased just some hours earlier.

What did it truly mean to be a leader? His mother had always told him that he should lead by example, by being the best stallion he could be. Though he had often tried to become an example of good behavior, his mother seemed to take exception to any of his enterprises. At one point, he had even thought of joining the royal guard, but to his great surprise, his mother had flown into a frenzy, telling him that the guard wasn't the right place for a colt of his stature, that he would hate it. She'd forbidden him from trying out as a junior recruit.

The prince had never known much about his father, Duke Blueblood the Fourth. Mother had always told him that his father had left soon after the young prince was born, that he had abandoned his family. It came to Blueblood's attention now that he had never taken a moment to look into the matter. However, he now felt curious. Over the last few days, his mother had proven to be wrong in more than a few ways. Perhaps there was more to his supposedly ingrate father than he had been led to believe. Blueblood made a mental note to look up his ancestry as soon as possible the next day. Looking back at one's hoofprints, the elderly wisemare had said.

Having already returned to his past, the thought of his old friends came back to him. Amethyst and Apricot. It had been years since they had seen each other. After a particularly crazy adventure of theirs during which the young prince had nearly hurt himself very badly, his mother had forbidden him from seeing the two of them again.

Of course, they had continued meeting in secret, but things had gone sour. Amethyst was the first to drift away.

"You're not the colt you used to be, Blueblood. You're no longer the colt I liked. You've become haughty, stiff. It's like you don't even care about ponies anymore."

Apricot had stood by him for a while, out of misguided admiration and friendship for his noble friend. Soon, however, Apricot had left as well.

“What happened to the Blueblood I used to know? You used to be awesome. Now you’re just a blowhard. I’m not good enough for you, huh? It’s all about social rank to you now. Can’t be seen with a commoner, huh? Well, fine with me! Go be seen without me all you want!”

Blueblood sighed at the memories. He had failed in the past, but he would not fail again. It was time to take back control of his life.

~~~

*Dear Lady Amethyst of the House of Gemstone Heart*

*It has been a long time since we last met, and I understand that I have not always been the best of friends to you. Our last meeting was, perhaps, rather tense.*

*Recently, I have been having somewhat of a change of heart. Events have pushed me to reconsider many things about myself, our lost friendship being one of the first.*

*I would like to extend an invitation for an amicable reunion, to see if, perhaps, we might be able to rekindle our lost friendship. I have extended a similar invitation to Apricot, and I am hoping that the three of us may one day stand again with one another.*

*With heartfelt hope,*

*~Prince Blueblood the Fifth*

~~~

Dear Apricot of the House of Fallen Leaves

I have come to realise, recently, just what I have done to drive you away. I recognize my faults and fully admit to my guilt.

I am sending the present letter in hopes of rekindling our friendship. Recent events have led me to reconsider myself and my actions, and to see just how much of a good friend I had driven away from my life.

In hopes of reviving our lost kinship, I hereby extend an invitation to you and Lady Amethyst for us to have a friendly reunion. Perhaps we might be able to work out our differences and resume our friendship where we had left off.

With the humblest of apologies for my past actions,

~Prince Blueblood the Fifth

~~~

Prince Blueblood gently set down the two scrolls on the bedside table, and put the quill and ink away. Tomorrow morning he would send the two letters off to Canterlot. Perhaps, with some luck, there was a chance to salvage that which he had stupidly thrown away.

Satisfied with his accomplishments for the day, Prince Blueblood settled upon the bed and slowly drifted off to sleep. Tomorrow was another day entirely, and would likely bring its share of surprises, but for now, all was good.



# Chapter 6

## Of Memories and Fantasies

"... I had no choice but to call him out. 'Gruel?' I said, 'Certainly you must be deranged.'"

The dining room of La Rose Dorée was rather empty this morning, Blueblood being the only customer present. Few ponies ever came to the restaurant, and only a handful of those made a regular habit of it. Still, thanks to catering to the richest ponies of the town, the restaurant was more than successful. As such, only two staff members were currently in the restaurant: The chef, Cordon Bleu, and the main waitress and connoisseuse, Crystal Château, both unicorns.

With little to do, Crystal had taken to chatting with the prince, who had quickly become a regular customer. Blueblood had taken every single meal of his at La Rose Dorée since his arrival in Ponyville, each time trying a different item off the menu. This, in turn, had led to the two of them becoming somewhat acquainted.

"Alors, Monsieur Blueblood, how are you finding our little town of Ponyville?"

It was actually hearing her voice, distinguished and colored with a slight Percheron accent, that had first attracted Blueblood's attention to the restaurant. He had always had a soft spot for Percheron haute cuisine, and La Rose Dorée had been more than successful at catering to that desire.

"I must say, it is slowly growing on me. Of course, I somewhat miss the luxuries of my home in Canterlot, but a small town such as this one does have its charms. I may just make plans to come back for a true vacation at a later date."

Crystal gave a warm smile.

"We'd be more than glad to have you again."

A bell chimed, indicating the arrival of new customers and startling the waitress.

“Oh! Off I go. Enjoy your breakfast, Prince Blueblood.”

Briskly trotting over to the incoming customers, Crystal left Blueblood with his order and his bill, so that he could finish eating and pay at his leisure. When she next came by his table, he had finished up and left sufficient bits to cover the meal, as well a copious tip.

With each passing day, his tips were becoming more and more generous.

~~~

The walk to the library turned out to be short and uneventful. As usual, Prince Blueblood flashed a few smiles to mares attracted by his dashing looks, but he paid them little attention. His heart was taken, and besides, he was out of their leagues.

A library built inside a tree? These ponies sure have strange ideas when it comes to architecture.

The sudden approach of a noisy mass startled Blueblood. Coming from the distance, he could hear the giggles of several foals, the pattering of many small hooves, and the buzz of a young pegasus' rapid wingbeats. The market was usually noisy in the late morning, but never as much as this.

Prince Blueblood watched in bewilderment as the Cutie Mark Crusaders came speeding by on their scooter and wagon, followed by a flock of a dozen of giggling, cheerful foals. He chuckled to himself at the sight, proud to have been an inspiration.

Finally, Blueblood found himself at the library's doorstep. He brought a hoof up to the door and knocked three times. Voices rang out from the inside.

“Spike! Can you get the door?”

“I'm on it, Twilight!”

Spike? Twilight? I'm sure I've heard these names before...

The door to the library swung open, revealing a young dragon assistant the likes of whom Prince Blueblood had met a few times. Surprised to see

such a creature here, the prince couldn't help but look Spike over a few times.

Of course! Twilight Sparkle from Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns and her assistant, Spike!

"Uh... hi? Can we help you?"

"Oh! Pardon my distraction. I was looking to consult a book on the noble lines of Canterlot genealogy, and someone recommended I come here. If I'm not mistaken, you would be Spike, assistant to Lady Twilight Sparkle of Canterlot, am I wrong?"

The young dragon blinked a few times, frowning, before calling out.

"Twilight, I think you might want to handle this one yourself."

Without any further words, he walked off in a huff, heading up the library stairs and leaving the prince alone at the door. Halfway up, he motioned to his eyes and then to Blueblood, as if to say "I'm watching you," before vanishing into the upper level.

Blueblood remained at the door, looking right to left and wondering whether or not he should come in, until he was greeted by a peculiar sound.

"Who?"

Startled, the prince looked around, trying to find his questioner. Finally, a small brown figure caught his eye. An owl was perched on the top of the door, looking down at him.

"Pardon me?"

"Who?"

"That's not a very polite way of asking, is it?"

"Who?"

"Oh, fine. I am Prince Blueblood."

"Who?"

"Prince Blueblood of Canterlot."

“Who?”

“Prince. Blueblood.”

“Who?”

“... Celestia's nephew?”

“Who?”

The prince stamped a hoof against the library's doorstep.

“How have you not heard of me? Everypony's heard of me!”

“Who?”

“I just told you! Prince Blueblood of Canterlot! Head of House Blueblood! Honorary nephew of Princess Celestia! Proprietor of Quill and Sofa International Incorporated, Hammer Hoof Hardware Limited and Hayfries n' Tulips Incorporated! I was twice elected most desirable bachelor in Equestria! I am a master of three classical schools of horn fencing, and the Equestrian champion of the stallions' division in *Longue Corne*! Equestrian Dreams Magazine gave me the Most Charming Smile Award for eight consecutive years! I was top of my class at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns and Class President in magic kindergarten! I swear, for all the manure in the world! How can you possibly not know my name?”

“Who?”

Blueblood could feel himself nearly catch fire, until the sound of a pony's voice startled him.

“Prince Blueblood, I wasn't expecting you to drop by! I see you've met Owlowsious already.”

As Twilight Sparkle came into view, his attention turned to her. He paused for a moment, surprised. He hadn't expected the awkward filly he'd known in school to have grown into such a pretty mare.

“Lady Sparkle, it has been quite a long time, has it not?”

Prince Blueblood bowed politely, and Twilight returned the gesture. Though it had been nearly a year since she had left Canterlot, the gestures of nobility had been ingrained in her from a very young age. Though her parents and herself were by no means royalty, her status as the Princess's

protégée had conferred to Twilight a position of noblesse, and thus, the title of Lady. In turn, this meant that she was expected to act properly in all matters relating to the courts of Canterlot.

“It certainly has. I’ve got to admit I was hoping for you to drop by. There are a few things I’d been meaning to ask you. May I ask what brings you to the library?”

“Certainly. I was hoping to borrow a book, but it would be no problem for me to stay and talk for a while.”

Twilight turned her head towards the back of the library.

“Spike! Could you prepare some tea? Thanks!”

~~~

“Blueblood, do you remember Professor Solaris?”

Blueblood rose from his seat, chuckling under his breath, and assumed a theatrical, grandiose posture.

“Third nebula left of Orion, the skies tell a shining story!”

Feeling a rush of giggling coming over her, Twilight matched the gesture, declaring loudly for all to hear.

“Fifteen stars north, fifteen stars east, a comet flies straight to glory!”

The two of them laughed for a moment, as Spike gawked in incomprehension.

“Huh?”

“Oh! Right. You were too young to remember. Professor Solaris was one of our teachers back at school. His enthusiasm was... something else entirely.”

Spike gave a nervous laugh. Noticing that the prince’s attention had drifted to scanning the library’s history section from his seat, he leaned in close to Twilight and frowned before whispering to her.

“Twilight, what are you doing? This is Prince Blueblood, remember? Rarity’s Prince Charmless! How can you be so nice to him?”

Twilight gave the young dragon a stern look, occasionally glancing at the prince to make sure he wouldn't notice.

"Spike, Prince Blueblood is an old friend of mine, and he's making an effort to redeem himself. Rarity wants us to give him a chance, and that includes you. I know you don't like him, but be respectful."

Her words were a stern admonishment, almost a hiss,.

Spike sighed in exasperation.

"Fine."

Twilight could only offer an apologetic smile and a quick but affectionate nuzzle to the young dragon before the prince snapped back to attention.

"I promise I'll make it up to you later."

After a few more moments of searching quietly, Blueblood zeroed in on a familiar book's spine amongst many others in the "History and Genealogy" section.

"Lady Twilight, I hope you won't mind if I borrow a book, yes?"

Twilight beamed at the question, marvelling at the thoughts of her precious books being useful to a pony.

"Sure, go right ahead!"

"Thank you oh-so-very much!"

The book leapt off the shelf and landed on the table, swerving around Prince Blueblood's teacup and slowly coming to a stop in front of him in a dexterous display of levitation magic. Intrigued, Twilight read the title of the tome her guest had selected.

### **House Majesty and House Blueblood: History and Genealogy - A Compilation of Works by Duke Silver Majesty XVII**

Blueblood magically opened the book, flipping through a few pages in search of a specific entry.

Spike rolled his eyes at the notion.

"Leave it to the prince to pick a book about himself and his family."

Twilight shot the young dragon an annoyed yet amused glare, unable to decide whether she should laugh or scold him. Finally, she had no choice.

“Spike! Be respectful!”

Prince Blueblood simply chuckled, thinking to himself that only two or three days ago, he would have unloaded a vicious verbal assault on the hatchling.

“No, no, it’s quite alright. It does look rather silly of me. However, young dragon, you’d be surprised how much there is to learn from the past. It is sad that I myself only learned that lesson yesterday; perhaps I could have avoided this dramedy my life has recently become had I known this earlier. If it’s alright with you, Lady Twilight, I’d like to borrow this book for a day or two. Some in-depth consultation is in order, and I would enjoy being able to consult it in my downtime.”

Twilight nodded in full understanding.

“Of course, no problem at all. Spike, please add it to the library records.”

Spike nodded, thankful for the occasion to get away from his rival, mumbling under his breath as he walked downstairs and shut the door to the library’s basement behind him.

“He’s up to something! I’m sure of it! Don’t you worry, my dear Rarity! I swear this clown’s empty charms won’t trouble you more than they already have!”

Having recorded the book checkout, Spike headed back upstairs, but opted not to enter the main room just yet. Confident that he wouldn’t be seen, he peeked out from behind the door frame and eavesdropped on Twilight and Blueblood’s conversation.

“... I don’t get it, Prince Blueblood. Back at school, you were so nice, and now, you’re well-educated and respectful. Just what happened at the gala with you and Rarity?”

Blueblood’s head lowered. He had strongly hoped not to have to approach the subject, but since the cat was now out of the bag, he relented.

“I must admit, by now, I am asking myself the same question. I can’t say I recall changing all that much, yet events around me these past weeks

have proven to me that I definitely have. I've mostly managed to drop that haughty facade I used to carry, and yet another problem plagues me. I often find myself having to consciously act polite against my own temperamental nature. 'He wears a mask and his muzzle grows to fit it,' as Oatwell so cleverly put it."

Twilight smiled at the reference.

"He was a wise stallion, for sure."

An awkward silence soon took over the library, as the two searched for words, until a suddenly more somber Twilight finally took it upon herself to speak out.

"Blueblood, you were really nice back in school, and I'm really not sure what happened these last few years, but... when you acted like you did to Rarity, it really hurt her. I'd never seen a pony look so miserable before."

Twilight's words struck home, leaving Blueblood to look down at the table.

*Did... did I truly hurt her so much? Oh dear...*

Seeing that the prince had nothing to say for himself, Twilight continued.

"I've seen your good sides before, I know you can turn things around, and I trust you. Just... please, be very careful around Rarity. I'd really hate to see her devastated again because you went and trampled all over her a second time."

Lowering his empty teacup onto the table, Prince Blueblood nodded his head politely.

"I promise, Lady Sparkle. Never again will this stallion act so uncouth. My past actions are objects of shame to me, and I have made it a point of honor to put them behind me and recover a more proper and noble image."

Twilight offered the prince an encouraging smile.

"In that case, I wish you the best of successes to turn things around."

Prince Blueblood politely bowed. A faint smile found its way through the prince's gloomy expression, thanks to Twilight's encouragement.



“Thank you very much for these kind words, Lady Sparkle. It was a pleasure meeting you again, but I fear I have some concerns to attend to.”

Twilight rose from her cushion, bowing in turn.

“Feel free to drop by anytime; my door is always open to a well-read pony like you. Also, please give my regards to the Princess.”

Prince Blueblood followed suit and stood up, the book levitating itself into his travel bag. As he headed for the door, he turned to Twilight and offered a charming smile.

“Thank you for the invitation; I’ll be sure to find some time. I’ll make sure to tell Celestia how proper and smart a lady her student has become.”

Twilight barely managed to stutter a simple salutation through her blushing. The compliment had hit home.

As the prince trotted away from the library, pondering what kind of discoveries he would make from a closer inspection of the borrowed book, he failed to realise that he was being followed by a bush with strange green thorns and a purple tail.

“A two-faced flatterer, that’s what he is. I’ll catch you red-hoofed yet, Blueblood. No fake charmer can get past this dragon’s keen senses! Don’t you worry, Rarity, I’ll make sure this... uh... how would she say it... ruffian! I’ll make sure this ruffian doesn’t disgrace you again!”

~~~

Not long after leaving the library, Blueblood was walking through Ponyville’s central park on the way back to his hotel room. By then, the desire to open up that book and read was burning him up from the inside, but first, he felt the need to wind down from the emotional reunion with his old classmate.

As he strolled across the gravel path, he slowly became aware of the unusual scenes around him. Foals running around and playing wildly, a musician stallion delighting a group of mares with his music, and a unicorn struggling to maintain a strange sitting position, much to her mate’s amusement. Unlike orderly, stuffy Canterlot, the ponies of Ponyville clearly had no problem having fun even if it made them look silly. It was all different from home, and yet it felt friendly. He didn’t feel like an outcast,

even though he was so different. Here, he wasn't Prince Blueblood, he was just Blueblood the potential friend. It was refreshing.

Perhaps I ought to come by this town every once in a while from now on, even if this all doesn't work out.

He levitated the book out of his bag and up to his eye level, pondering to himself as he walked.

How did I never think to look into this? It is quite unbecoming of a stallion such as I not to have looked into his line before. As proud as I am of being head of House Blueblood, it feels rather silly of me.

But then, Mother has told me so much about Father. How he just up and left one day, abandoning his own kin; he was an awful stallion, unworthy of his name, so she said. I trusted her blindly for so long, but...

Prince Blueblood's thoughts went silent, replaced by pure doubt. Over the last few days, he had discovered that his mother had been wrong on many things. What it meant to lead, how his behavior really appeared, so many things he had thought true had only led to his misery. Could she also be wrong about Father? He would soon have his answer.

The prince settled down on an empty park bench, unable to wait any longer. He opened up the book in front of him, quickly riffling through the pages.

"Now, let's see... House Blueblood... direct descendants of Princess Celestia, branched off from the older House Majesty when Duke Blueblood the First was granted some land by Princess Celestia..."

He fanned ahead, looking for something more specific.

"Prince Blueblood the Fifth. Hmm, they have an entry about me. Interesting. Son of Duke Blueblood the Fourth and Précieuse... The title of Prince as granted to foals personally godmothered by Princess Celestia... Okay, nothing I didn't know here."

Prince Blueblood turned back a few pages.

"Ah! Here we are. Duke Blueblood the Fourth. Son of Duke Blueblood the Third, obviously. Born in Canterlot on the year of... okay, deceased..."

Prince Blueblood's jaw dropped as the next words sunk into his mind.

“Died defending Canterlot from an invasion? Personal honor guard of Celestia herself? Mother! You hid this all from me?”

Suddenly, it was all clear. Her near smothering. Her panicked reaction when he wanted to try out for the guard. Those times when he had caught her crying at night over Father’s picture. Her insistence that he always stay at her side. It all made sense now.

She was afraid that she would lose her son like she had lost her husband. It could only be that. But... why the spankings? Why all the anger? Couldn’t she simply have been honest with him? Why had she lied to him for so long?

Silently, his hooves shaking, Prince Blueblood slowly closed the book. He attempted to pick it up with his magic but faltered, resorting to moving it into his bag with his mouth. He rose from the bench and walked away, nearly unaware of his surroundings. He would need some time to wrap his head around it all.

~~~

Rarity walked out of Carousel Boutique feeling relaxed, if somewhat disappointed. With business running at a snail’s pace today and Sweetie Belle off with their parents, her day at the shop had been a complete bore. Having no dresses to sew, no mess to clean and no ponies to give makeovers to, the fashionista figured she’d close up shop for the day.

Last evening, she’d discussed the latest developments of the prince’s quest. She’d heard about him helping plough the field and clean the barn, and how he’d even done his best to put up with the Cutie Mark Crusaders’ antics.

Sweetie Belle had also added oil to that fire, asking Rarity about Prince Blueblood some more, saying he had seemed pretty nice to her, and that the story he’d told her and her friends had given them a great idea for crusading.

*Prince Blueblood is changing... for me? I must be the luckiest mare in all of Equestria!*

Rarity was dragged out of her thoughts by a sudden craving for one of Sugarcube Corner’s famous low-fat lily turnovers. With nothing else to

occupy her day, she shrugged and daintily trotted off to the bakery, hoping she might run into some of her friends.

As usual, Sugarcube Corner failed to disappoint. Not only was Pinkie at work, somehow having anticipated Rarity's arrival and immediately offered her the aforementioned turnover fresh out of the oven, but Rainbow Dash was also present, eagerly munching on a lemon tart.

"Hi Rarity! Welcome to Sugarcube Corner, where life is always sweet! Looking for the usual?"

Pinkie Pie giggled. She was the one to have come up with the bakery's new greeting, and she reveled in saying it every time a customer walked in. Before Rarity could even answer, the turnover had been plated and thrust into her hooves.

"While I would enjoy being asked next time before you hand me the pastry, yes, that is exactly what I was coming here for. Thank you very much."

Rarity levitated a few bits over to Pinkie, before sitting down at the same table as Rainbow Dash.

"Hey Rarity, fancy running into you here."

Having her mouth full of crust and lemon filling was no obstacle for Rainbow Dash. The unicorn rolled her eyes, wiping a speck of sprayed food from her right cheek with a glare of sheer disgust.

"Rainbow Dash! You would do well to swallow before you speak."

Rainbow Dash swallowed audibly, wiping crumbs off the side of her muzzle before giving a nervous giggle.

"Sorry, Rarity."

"Rainbow Dash, I swear, sometimes, you are the worst."

Rarity sighed, before remembering why she had been hoping to run into friends.

Before Rarity had a chance to touch her food, she became aware of Pinkie Pie sitting uncomfortably close to her. Somewhat uneasy, the unicorn dragged her chair a few hooves away from the intrusion and daintily took a bite of the fresh turnover, chewing a few times before

swallowing and magically wiping the corner of her muzzle with a paper napkin before she explained.

“Now then, Rainbow Dash, I’ve heard from Applejack that the two of you have had a run-in with Prince Blueblood?”

At Rarity’s words, Rainbow Dash burst into laughter, almost spitting the remainder of her tart onto the table.

“A run-in? More like a run-into!”

Pinkie joined Rainbow Dash in laughter, until Rarity quieted them both.

“What do you mean, a run-into?”

Reclining back in her chair, the pegasus grinned awkwardly, attempting to cover for herself.

“Well, I saw Prince Haughty walking around the street, acting all ‘look at me, I’m the most important pony in all of Equestria’, and I kind of... just happened to lose control of my flight at that moment, and... uh... accidentally knocked him into a dirty puddle when I crashed into him?”

Pinkie opened her mouth to speak, but was quickly overridden by Rarity’s exclamation.

“Rainbow Dash! How could you? I know Prince Blueblood hasn’t exactly been a model of good behavior, but deliberately crashing into him? That is unbecoming of a lady!”

Rainbow Dash leaned forward against the table, panicked.

“Whoa, whoa! I’d never crash into someone intentionally! Look, I’ll be honest. I just wanted to give him a scare, you know, fly close to him, ruffle his mane, just bother him a little. But, uh... I kind of messed up and crashed into him.”

The white unicorn gave an annoyed sigh, burying her face in her hoof.

“Whatever shall I do with you, Rainbow Dash? A noblecolt comes to town looking for me, resolves to better himself for my attention, and you go and tackle him into a dirty, filthy puddle.”

Rarity stopped to ponder for a moment, struggling to bear with her histrionics.

"Oh, this is awful, this is just plain awful! How do you think this will reflect on me? Rainbow, do you not realise what you've done? I insist that you seek him out and apologize! To think a good friend of mine would crash into that noblecolt!"

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes in response.

"Uh... a noblecolt? The only time I'd call him noble is with an I and a G ahead of it. Rarity, this is Prince Cakeface we're talking about! The jerk of the gala! Just a couple weeks ago you were calling him words I'd never even use to describe Discord!"

Rarity recoiled, taken aback.

"But... things aren't the same anymore! He's changing for me! He said it! Applejack saw it!"

The brash pegasus flicked her head dismissively, rolling her eyes.

"Pfft! Please. Like a pony can just change from one day to the other. Rarity, hate to have to be the one to tell you, but you're lost in your Disneigh Princess fantasies again! Get back down to Equestria a little, would you?"

"But... but... just see him go! He was ploughing the fields in Applejack's orchard just two days ago! He bought muffins for Ditzy Doo and her daughter!"

Rainbow Dash nodded.

"I'll give you that one, he is getting good at being nice, when he's in a good mood. But have you seen him in a bad mood? He shouted at me and called me a madmare!"

Rarity cocked an eyebrow.

"Rainbow, I shouted at you and called you a madmare last week. Plus, you crashed into him."

"Okay, you've got a point. Still, he's far from being as good as you think he is. Do you think you're the only one Applejack told about Blueblood? Have you seen his attitude? He's always sighing and just barely holding back his annoyance. He almost snapped at Scootaloo when she'd barely

done anything and he sneered at Pinkie Pie when they first met. It's never, 'Sure, I'll do it!' It's always, 'If I must!'"

The unicorn nodded quietly, silenced by Rainbow Dash's words.

"Look, I'll admit, he's making a good effort. Even I have to recognize that. But... it's all fake right now; he's forcing it. It's not real yet, and we have no way to know if it'll ever be that way. I know you're hoping this works, and as much as I don't like him, I really hope it all works out for you. All I'm asking is, please, be careful. You're my friend, and I'd hate to see you get hurt again because some doofus of a prince thought he could change in a snap and sweep you off your hooves, only to fumble and drop you onto the pavement."

Rarity sighed.

"I... guess you're right, Rainbow Dash. I'll be careful not to go off in fantasies again, and try to keep my head on my shoulders about this. There's only one thing I'd like to ask of you. Please, take a moment and apologize to Blueblood for crashing into him, would you?"

The pegasus begrudgingly nodded.

"Fine, but if he's rude to me when I do so, I can't be held responsible for my actions."

Rarity chuckled and smirked.

"A fine bargain. Now then, what about you, Pinkie?"

The two ponies looked around. Pinkie Pie was nowhere to be seen. Rainbow Dash stepped over to the counter.

"Pinkie?"

There was a second of awkward silence until the bakery's door suddenly crashed open. Pinkie Pie dashed in, dragging the Cutie Mark Crusaders in behind her and slamming the door with one of her hindlegs.

"Behind the counter, they won't find you!"

Galloping under Rarity and Rainbow Dash's confused muzzles, the three fillies ducked behind the counter as a dozen angry foals poured through the main entrance in a flash. Their de facto leader, a blue filly with a bow and arrow cutie mark, stepped forward.

“Come out, Cutie Mark Crusaders! We know you’re in there!”

Thankfully, Pinkie quickly calmed the mob down through the amazing magic of free, extra-frosted cupcakes. Once the bakery was clear, the Cutie Mark Crusaders walked out from their hiding place, out of breath.

While Rainbow Dash was too busy laughing at the mishap to question what had happened, Rarity looked down at her sister and sternly questioned her.

“Sweetie Belle! Please tell me, what was that chaos all about? I want to hear the whole story.”

Sweetie Belle scraped her hoof against the floor a few times. Apple Bloom and Scootaloo looked just as dejected as she did.

“Well... it all started when we decided to try for our Pony Leading Cutie Marks...”

~~~

The rest of Blueblood’s day was, to his great relief, devoid of any problems. In order to settle from his emotions and calm his frenzied mind, he had gone for a walk in town. Thoughts of his parents kept galloping through his mind, but he knew that there was no point in worrying too much about them, that things would be clear in due time.

A surprise inspection at the local branch of Quills and Sofas had revealed business to be booming, especially in the fainting couch department, and local manager Mr. Davenport had been promised a bonus.

Next, Blueblood had encountered the local spa and treated himself to their most luxurious stallions’ treatment, where the amazing talent of Lotus’s expert hooves had massaged away the tension he had built up from working so hard. On his way out, he had encountered Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon, themselves heading to the spa. Their endearing smiles had helped soothe his spinning head and worried heart.

Later, he had stumbled upon Sweet Apple Acres’ apple stand. Out of curiosity, he’d decided to give their produce a second chance, this time opting for a fresh apple rather than a sugar-laden fatty fritter. It hadn’t been really fair of him to judge them on a product he’d already known himself to dislike. However, a taste of the fresh produce itself, straight from the apple cellar, had shown him just why the orchard was so popular. Fresh, crisp,

sweet, and delicious. He couldn't help but purchase a few more to eat that evening, and he had made a mental note to seek investment opportunities in their business. It was clear that Sweet Apple Acres was destined to become a very big name and that he would be a fool to pass on such an opportunity.

Finally, he had made a most unexpected encounter on the way to his hotel room: a zebra mare. Zecora, as her name was, had been more than impressed when the prince had greeted her according to her native land's customs, the way his uncle, an Equestrian ambassador in the zebra lands, had taught him.

His day now behind him, Blueblood arrived in the hotel's lobby. Despite having been through the lavish décor several times since his arrival in Ponyville, it never ceased to impress him. The tapestries, the warm red carpet, the great chandelier; it reminded him of the luxuries of Canterlot.

The hotel's manager, a middle-aged unicorn with a snowy white mane, stepped out from behind the counter to greet him, magically levitating an envelope over to him.

"Excuse me, Prince Blueblood, you have received some mail while you were away."

Blueblood's magic gently picked up the envelope as he walked by her, bowing politely.

"Thank you very much, Ms. Dreams."

Sweet Dreams bowed back respectfully as the prince disappeared into the hotel's main corridor and headed to his room.

~~~

Settling down for the evening, Blueblood laid out the borrowed book and the apples, then looked the envelope up and down on every side. There was no signature on the envelope, only a logo that he had come to know very well: Carousel Boutique. Prince Blueblood extracted the letter from the envelope in the blink of an eye and settled down onto the couch to read comfortably.

*Esteemed Prince Blueblood,*

*I have been made aware of your recent bout of soul-searching and learning here in Ponyville. My friend Applejack, whom I presume you have met several times over the last few days spent on the farm, has informed me of the current situation.*

*I would like to congratulate you for allowing yourself to step off your pedestal and for doing some solid farm work. It is rather endearing to know that a noblecolt such as you would try his hoof at it. I have myself offered some of my time to help my dear friend Applejack, and I know just how discouraging that labor can be.*

*I have also heard of your commendable generosity to our local mailmare and her daughter. I have nothing but compliments to give here. That is a sign of a true noble stallion.*

*However, I have been made aware of more than just the good. Your altercation with Rainbow Dash, for one. While I do not hold you fully responsible, for I know that she can be quite a hoofful, I believe that your reaction to her was most uncouth. Sneering at poor Pinkie Pie before she had a chance to make a good impression on you wasn't exactly nice of you either.*

*Still, all in all, I am very impressed by how much progress you have made since you first knocked on my door. There is yet hope for you, Prince Blueblood, and should you follow this path you have chosen, there may yet be hope for us.*

*Wishing you the best of successes,*

*Rarity*

As he set down the letter, a smile slowly traced itself upon Blueblood's face. Soon, a chuckle came to him, then another. Then, he erupted into gleeful laughter.

"I stand a chance! She knows! She cares! Oh, Rarity! Beautiful Rarity! Thank you for these kind words of hope! I shall not betray your trust!"

~~~

Big Macintosh smiled as he tapped the loose earth around the new sapling's roots. The new tree, now bathing in the sunset, was barely a dozen hooves high, but would most likely be several meters tall by the time the farm passed on to the next generation.

Though he was happy to help Blueblood's cause, Big Macintosh was thankful for a calm day with nothing to trouble him. Only his family, the farm, and his work were on his mind today, giving him some quiet peace for thought.

"Now then, what do we call you, little fella?"

The red stallion sat down, pondering for a moment, until an idea came to him.

"Considerin' who got the earth here ready for you, I guess I may as well give him the honors. Prince it is."

Satisfied with his work for the day, Big Macintosh headed back to the barn, glancing at his collar for a moment to make sure the precious note was still safely tucked inside.

That night, the red stallion went to bed with an oafish smile on his face and a delicate mare dancing through his thoughts.

And there I was thinkin' things couldn't get any better.