



# A Slighty Cruller Fate

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# Chapter 1

*Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.*

"Excuse me, Princess?"

"Just one moment!" *Thunk.* Somewhat dazed, Luna pulled her face away from the desk. "Come in!" she said, her horn and muzzle throbbing slightly.

Through the door trotted - oh, what a surprise! Yet another pony levitating a stack of papers about twice the size of the last. "Princess," he said, oblivious to the piercingly-annoyed glare in Luna's eyes, "The request to change the Equestrian national tree from the Holly Oak to the Bay Willow has been withdrawn, so the reinstatement paperwork needs to be filled out."

*This late at night?* "Alright," replied Luna, already readying her quill, "I think I can-"

"And," he interrupted, "The budget cuts for the School for Gifted Unicorns need to be finalized."

*That again?!* "Of course." Luna nodded, keeping her voice as level as she could. "Just give me-"

"And, lest it be forgotten," said the rather daring delegate, "The paperwork regarding regulation of the Canterlot squirrel population needs to be renewed again."

*Oh, by my sister's name...* "Not a problem." Luna's left eyelid twitched every-so-slightly. "I'll have it done as soon as I can."

The stallion nodded. "Thank you, your majesty." He bowed his head, setting the stack of papers on the Princess' desk before he crept out.

Luna waited to hear the door click before collapsing on the newest pile of bureaucracy. She turned slightly, aiming her gaze out the window and at the night sky.

"I swear," she murmured, unusually exhausted for a near-omnipotent alicorn princess, "I swear if I receive one more paper to litigate, delegate, renew, or anything of the sort, that I'll..." She sighed. "Well, I'll certainly do *something*."

The door clicked open. "Oh, one more thing: the authenticity of Blueblood's family tree still needs verification, so if you could-"

Before the astoundingly dull stallion could utter another syllable, Luna certainly did something.

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Pony Joe had seen a wide variety of sights at the donut shop. He'd seen ponies sleeping soundly after half a donut, and a dragon down three boxfuls without batting an eye. He'd seen pegasi doing barrel rolls around the ceiling, and unicorns having jousts near the bar. He'd even borne witness to some long-haired stallion accidentally letting loose a half-dozen starving crazed weasels.

The one thing he'd never seen, nor expected to, was a blue alicorn suddenly materializing in the middle of the shop, teeth bared and wings fully extended as scorched bits of paper fell to the floor around her. Not to mention having not one, not two, but three of his tables simultaneously light on fire.

"One more thing, hrm?" she muttered viciously to herself, "Sure, just one more thing to an ever-increasing pile of 'one-more-things!' Well, they can just stick all of those...things, up their-"

Before Luna could finish her self-gratifying rant, she was coated in white foam. She blinked, beginning to notice that this location failed to look the least bit like her office. The tan unicorn wielding a fire extinguisher certainly hadn't been part of the decor, nor had the blackened tables surrounding her.

"Uhm..." Luna stood for a moment, still, wide-eyed, and terribly confused. "...Hello?"

Pony Joe, ignoring Luna's timid greeting, immediately dropped the red canister and bowed deeply. "So sorry, your majesty! I didn't know that...I mean, I didn't expect...erm..." He looked up sheepishly. "...Do you need a towel or something?"

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Luna emerged from the restroom, heaving finally removed the last remnants of extinguisher foam from her coat. Pony Joe had done the same to the tables, and was currently in the process of moving the damaged ones to the back and pulling out slightly less burnt replacements.

"Do you need some help?" she asked.

Pony Joe looked up and then away, still embarrassed. "No, your majesty, I -"

"Luna."

He turned back to the Princess. "I'm sorry?"

"Luna," she repeated, "I appreciate the cordiality, but I'd prefer if the atmosphere was a touch more casual for the moment."

"Uhm, alright then, Luna..." Pony Joe paused, the name sounding alien without 'Princess' preceding it. After a few seconds of him dragging tables and Luna standing uncomfortably at the side, he spoke again. "So, what brought you here?"

*Constant irritation* was the first answer to cross Luna's mind. "Constant irritation," she said, immediately biting her tongue.

Pony Joe froze in mid-stride. "Pardon?"

Luna sighed. "Ever since I resumed my duties as Princess, I've yet to have more than a few moments where I wasn't engulfed in paperwork and politics. I was desperate to get out."

"And so you decided to come to a donut shop?"

*So that's where I am*, she thought, *Explains the donut display*. "Well, I didn't really *mean* to go anywhere besides 'away from my office.' Speaking of which, I do apologize for the tables."

Pony Joe smiled. "Don't worry about it, prin - Luna. I've had far worse." Seeing Luna raise an eyebrow, he quickly added, "N-n-not that you're...I mean, it's all...um..."

He felt an immeasurable surge of relief when Luna began to laugh. "It's fine."

He nodded, the blood slowly draining back away from his cheeks. "Thanks," he said, making his way back to the bar.

Luna nodded, then noticed something: "Might I inquire as to the current absence of customers?"

"Well, I was actually closing up when you came in."

"Oh." Luna started towards the door. "I suppose I should depart, as well."

"Hey, wait just a sec!" Pony Joe slid open the donut display. "I'm not letting a princess leave my shop without a batch of donuts!"

Luna paused, then turned her gaze towards the display.

"C'mon, it's on me. Whatever donut you want, free of charge. Least I can do."

Luna smiled, hiccuping a laugh. "For letting me demolish three of your tables?"

"Sure, why not?" he replied, chuckling softly. He gestured to the bar. "C'mon, take a look. Name's Pony Joe, by the way."

"Can I call you PJ?" asked Luna with a giddy smile and not the slightest hesitation.

Pony Joe paused, the smile fading from his face. "If anypony else asked that (and believe me, they have), I'd say no, but for you..." His smile then returned with a much brighter intensity. "Just don't wear it out."

Pony Joe (or PJ, as he was now going to be relentlessly referred to) could almost swear that he heard Princess Luna squeak. *That'd be two once-in-a-lifetime events in one night*, he thought.

Luna trotted up to the bar, pulling herself onto one of the stools as she looked at the carefully arranged assortment of donuts.

"So, what's your favorite? Glazed? Chocolate cake? Blueberry butterscotch and sprinkles?"

"Um, I'm not sure..."

"C'mon, everypony has a favorite donut! Everypony that's tried one, at least!"

Smiling, it was a moment before he noticed Luna staring to the side, uncomfortably shuffling her front hooves. "Oh...you've never...?"

"Yes," she replied bluntly.

"Well..." Pony Joe smiled somewhat awkwardly. "It's hard to go wrong with donuts, so pick any of 'em."

"Alright. Erm..." Luna scanned the rows of pastries. "I'll take that one."

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"...And for the entire night, I thought that this dragon was gonna be my only customer. But a couple hours before closing, in trot six mares who *really* looked a mess, I'm tellin' ya. And then, you wouldn't believe it, in trots nopony other than -"

*Ring-a-ding-ding!*

Pony Joe, somewhat irritated at having his story interrupted, turned to the door. "Sorry, pal, but we're clo-" The color drained from his face as he realized who the regal pony entering was. "Y-your majesty! I'm sorry, I thought-"

Princess Celestia laughed, waving a dismissive hoof. "Oh, it's quite alright." Then, having addressed the faint stallion, turned to her stunned sister. "Luna! I've been looking everywhere for you!" Laughing, she added, "I have to say, you made quite a show."

"By teleporting?" asked Luna quizzically.

"Well, less by teleporting, and more by rendering your office to a heap of rubble and ash."

"...Oh."

Celestia laughed again. "It's nothing. Just another few hours of work for the janitors." She paused, looking between the two ponies in front of her. "Sorry, am I interrupting?"

"No, you're fine, sister," said Luna as her smile returned, "Me and PJ were just talking."

Celestia raised an eyebrow, turning to the stallion. "I could have sworn that everypony referred to you as Pony Joe."

"Well, of course that's my name, but..."

"But I call him PJ," interrupted Luna, grinning as she suppressed a giggle. At that, Pony Joe blushed slightly.

Celestia's eyebrow remained raised, then lowered as her smile widened. "Well, I assume you won't be going anywhere else, then, Luna?"

Luna shrugged. "Not that I can think of."

"Alright, then." Celestia turned, trotting towards the exit. "Just come back to the castle when you're done, I'll be waiting. And don't rush yourself; you two take all the time you want."

"Thank you, Celly!" called Luna. She turned to Pony Joe, who still looked a little pale. She laughed. "Okay, you can breathe now."

"What? Oh, yeah, sorry." There was a moment's pause. "Say, what's your sister like?"

"You should know," replied Luna, "Everypony should. She makes enough public appearances."

"I know, but what I meant was whether she was any different in private."

Luna chuckled, shaking her head. "Not in the slightest. She's a decent ruler enough of the time, but all too often, she acts...she acts like a big filly, for lack of a better comparison."

"How so?"

"Well..." Luna leaned on the bar, nibbling on her donut as she searched for an example. "You remember that big disaster at the Gala this last year?"

"Yeah?"

"That was her. She invited some ponies that she *knew* would 'spice things up,' as she'd put it."

"And by spice things up, you mean..."

"Destroy just about everything, yes."

Pony Joe coughed up a laugh. "Heh...not exactly behavior I'd expect from a princess, to be honest."

"Can't say I blame you. Then again, I'm the princess who's spent her night talking in a donut bar."

Pony Joe frowned. "Sorry, you not enjoying yourself?"

Luna nearly choked on her bite of donut. "What? Oh, no no no, that's not what I meant! It's just...why are you smiling?"

Pony Joe shook his head, chuckling softly. "Nothing, you're just being...cute."

Luna blinked. "Cute?"

"Cute."

"Erm..." Luna found her cheeks very suddenly and very uncomfortably warm. "Thanks, PJ."

"Don't mention it, Luna." Pony Joe took a look at the clock. "Say, it's getting late. You need to start heading back?"

"What? Oh, of course. I still have work to do...and an office to replace," she added with a chuckle.

"Well, you need anything to go?"

"Oh, yes. I'll take some of those...what did you call them? The little ball-things?"

"Donut holes?"

"Yes, those. A bag of those, please."

"No problem." Pony Joe levitated out a paper bag, scooping out a generous portion and handing it to the Princess. "Take care, and come back soon."

"Thanks," said Luna, taking the bag and smiling, "I will."

Luna trotted through the door, the bell ringing above her as she exited onto the dark Canterlot streets. She began trotting back to the castle, then jumped when she heard: "So did you enjoy yourself?"

Luna turned, her heart ready to burst. "Celly?" She picked her bag off the ground, thanking the Goddess that none of the donut holes had spilled out. "I thought you went back to the castle?"

"I lied."

"What a surprise. Now, would you care to tell me why you decided to frighten the living moonbeams out of me?"

"I can never resist a good scare, you know that."

"Right."

"Also, I felt the need to ask you something."

"It couldn't have waited until I returned?"

"It could have, but I felt as if it was something better to be answered sooner rather than later."

"Well, what is it?" asked Luna with a heavy tinge of impatience.

Celestia, smiling mischievously, whispered in her sister's ear, "You like him, don't you?"



Luna's face instantly went a deep shade of red, and she leaned away from her sister. "Celly, I just met him!"

"*That's* a yes."

Luna sighed. "Alright, so I find him...appealing, to say the least. But why -"

"Luna," interrupted Celestia, "If you ask 'why would he like me,' I swear to me that I'll send you to the moon right now."

Luna scowled at her sister.

"Too soon?"

"Too soon."

"Alright, I'm sorry. But honestly, my own star pupil couldn't find a number high enough to count the reasons why *anypony*, let alone Pony Joe, would be attracted to you."

"I..." Luna sighed again. "I suppose you're right."

"Of course I am," agreed Celestia, "But let's not focus on that. We have more pressing matters at hoof."

"Like what?"

"Like when you and PJ are going to see each other again," replied Celestia with a barely-contained smile.

Luna glared at Celestia. "You're mildly evil, you know that?"

"Evil is such a harsh word, Luna. I prefer... 'fun-loving.'"

"Oh, what's the difference? Anyways, I'd prefer you to stay out of my affairs from here on out."

"Oh, I will, Luna," swore Celestia, "I promise."

\*\*\*

*Ring-a-ding-ding.*

Pony Joe looked up from the counter, which he had once again been cleaning. "Evenin', sir, what'll it be?"

The stallion trotted uncomfortably through the donut shop, glancing around awkwardly at the donut-devouring ponies surrounding him. "I assume that you're Pony Joe, the proprietor of this establishment?"

"Erm...yes."

"I have a private message for you from Princess Luna."

Pony Joe could almost feel the weight of the immediate silence, as well as the numerous stares immediately thrown his way. He sighed. "What's it say?"

The stallion scoffed. "I certainly didn't read it," he said, levitating it to Pony Joe, "That's generally what the term 'private' is meant to imply."

"Oh, erm...right." Pony Joe took the letter, unrolling it.

*Dear PJ,*

*I enjoyed our time last night, and I'm hoping to get to know you better. Would it be possible for you to meet me at the park tomorrow, say, around noon? Much appreciated.*

*Signed,*

*Princess Luna*

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"Luna? It's Celly."

"Just one moment!" Luna gulped down one more donut hole from the near-empty bag. "Come in!"

Celestia trotted into Luna's new office. "I must say, the decorators did a good job in here."

"Well, they're paid for something, are they not?" replied Luna, turning back to her work.

"Heh, yes, of course," agreed Celestia tentatively, "Paid."

Luna blinked, looking up from her papers with a slightly loosened jaw.

"Oh, I'm kidding, Luna. You really need to lighten up."

"Well, pardon me for not pranking everypony at every possible opportunity, Celly."

"Oh, I do not -"

Luna simply stared at her sister.

"Well...maybe a little," she admitted.

"I thought so. Anyways, what was it you wanted?"

"Well, I was thinking of how stressful things have been for you, lately. I mean, not everypony gets so worked up that they destroy their office..."

Luna eyed her sister suspiciously. "Alright, what do you have planned?"

Celestia's smile dripped with mischief. "Oh, nothing grand," she said with horribly-feigned innocence. Then, "What time is it?"

Luna, reluctant to take her eyes off of Celestia, glanced briefly at the clock. "A quarter to twelve. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Just somepony I have waiting for you down at the park..."

"Celly, what -" Luna froze, her mouth hanging open in horror. "Oh, Celestia...tell me you *didn't*..."

Celestia's smile only widened in response.

*"You didn't."*

And wider.

"...You did." Luna glowered at her sister, receiving only laughter in response.

"Trust me, Luna. You'll thank me later."

Luna sighed, her glare keeping in strength as she stood. "For a so-called benevolent ruler, you can be a real pain in the flank."

"It's just one of the perks, Luna. You might learn to enjoy them, someday."

"Whatever you call it, we'll talk about it later." Luna checked her mane in a nearby mirror before heading towards the door. "Thanks to you, I have less than fifteen minutes to get to the park."

"Well, best not to be late," said Celestia casually, "Be a shame to waste those flowers he got you."

Luna paused. "How do you...?"

Celestia smiled again.

"...Nevermind." And she was gone.

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Pony Joe sat on the bench, gazing languidly at the park fountain as he waited, only a tickle of nervousness at the back of his mind.

"PJ!"

And just like that, the nervous tickle became a throttling anxiety. He leapt up, smiling timidly with the flowers beside him.

"H-hey, Princess!" He levitated the bouquet towards her. "I thought it'd be best if I brought these. You don't mind, do you?"

Luna smiled, graciously taking the flowers and sniffing them. "Not in the slightest. I'm glad you came."

"Well, it's not every day that a princess asks you to join her in the park."

"No," agreed Luna, "I suppose not." There was a pause. "So, how's business?"

PJ began trotting, Luna following behind. "About as good as you'd expect, really."

"You get by, don't you?"

"Yeah, 'course I get by. It's just..." He sighed. "Donut-making's not exactly the most glamorous profession, ya know?"

"I suppose not," conceded Luna, "But you enjoy it, don't you?"

"Well, I sure don't hate it," he replied, "The donut-making itself ain't that bad, and I've made good friends with some of the regulars." He chuckled. "Plus, I've heard some pretty good jokes in my time there."

Luna smiled. "Can I hear one?"

PJ returned the smile. "Sure. So, these two colts are talking at school, and one of 'em says to the other, 'I know a great way to make some bits off your folks...'"

\*\*\*

"Wait for it..."

"Snapshot, would you please..."

"Wait for it..."

"Snapshot..."

"*Wait for it...*"

"*Snapshot!*" hissed the sandy-maned pony, "I've been at this as long as you have, I know how and when to take a bucking picture!"

The blue-maned pegasus shrunk back. "Sorry, Dee."

Dee ignored the apology. "And in three...two...one..." *Click*.

The princess turned, prompting the two photo-ponies to duck further into the bushes.

"...Did you hear something, PJ?"

Pony Joe looked around, then shook his head. "Did you?"

Luna shrugged. "I guess not." She then smiled, trotting ahead. "Now, come, I want to hear more of that story."

Pony Joe chuckled. "Well, like I was saying, this customer just comes up to the bar and - I kid you not! - suggests that I start making *oatmeal donuts*. So of course I tell her..."

When the two were out of earshot, the two hidden ponies simultaneously let out a relieved sigh, followed by light giggles.

"PJ?" Snapshot snickered. "Oh, this is gonna be *fun*..."

Dee smirked. "It will be, if you don't get us caught."

"C'mon," replied Snapshot indignantly, "When have I ever gotten us caught?"

Dee, still smirking, raised her eyebrow. "Never. But it wouldn't be hard to imagine."

"Ouch." Snapshot put a hoof to his chest. "That hurts right here, Dee."

"Oh, suck it up, you filly. Now c'mon, we're gonna lose 'em."

As Dee trotted ahead, staying in the trees, Snapshot sighed. "The things I put up with..."

“What was that?”

“Er, right behind you!” he lied, flapping his wings frantically to catch up.

Dee, trotting ahead, giggled smugly. “That’s what I thought.”

# Chapter 2

*Mid-morning, Canterlot Castle.*

"Celly?"

Celestia glanced away from the police reports spread over her desktop to her sister standing in the doorway. "Oh, Luna, come in. Excuse me a moment, I'm just..." Celestia chuckled. "With an F-1 racing chariot? Where'd he even get the costumes?"

"Erm, Celly?" Luna's urgent tone proceeded to be ignored as Celestia's giggling grew stronger.

"At a soccer game? And no one realized? Oh, Goddess..."

"Celly, I need to -" Luna was interrupted again as Celestia's laugh became a bellowing guffaw.

"That one in a zoo!" she exclaimed with a mix of disbelief and admiration, "And with so many other ponies, too! Oh, Rémi, if only I had your brilliance..." Luna witnessed her sister's eyes close as she began to subtly bite her lip, clearly lost in some fantasy nopony should ever be made aware of, and lost it.

"*CELLY!*"

Celestia jolted, refocusing on her sister. "Oh, yes? What's wrong?"

Luna, fuming, slammed a magazine on her sister's desk. "*This.*"

Celestia looked at the magazine, then at Luna with her eyebrow raised. "The tabloids?"

"*Read it.*"

Celestia stared at her enraged sister for a few more seconds, then turned back to the magazine. "'Pony Joe as first recruit of the radical New Lunar Republic?' Oh, dear... 'Eating disorder to blame for Princess Luna's choice of stallion?' Now why would they... 'Princess obliterates her own office in a night of donut-ridden passion?'" Celestia looked back to Luna with a visage that managed a quizzical, concerned, and slightly amused tone all at once. Luna ignored this, her muzzle scarlet with fury.

"*Exactly!*" Luna's voice ran with deep reverberation, and she began to pace around Celestia's office. "*They think they get away with slander of this breadth, do they?! I demand that everypony working in the establishment printing this publication be tried, put in the stocks, and thrown in the dungeons! It's a villainy most foul, I tellest thou!*"

Celestia blinked. "Luna, I thought we'd fixed this..."

Luna froze in mid-stride, the red in her face turning to blush for a moment. "Erm, my apologies, Celly. Relapse."

"‘Relapse’ indeed," agreed Celestia, "And anyways..." She sighed. "I'm sorry, Luna, but what we called ‘slander’ one thousand years ago now goes by another name."

"Which would be?"

"‘Journalism.’ And, might I add, it's legal."

Luna's jaw dropped. "S-so we can do nothing?"

Celestia smirked, reclining slightly. "Oh, I wouldn't say that, but -"

Both princesses jolted as somepony began knocking.

"Come in!" beckoned Celestia.

Into the office trotted a pony bearing the unmistakable armor of a royal guard. He bowed, then removed his helmet before speaking.

"Princess Celestia, Princess Luna," he said flatly, "We have two ponies out here, both requesting to see..." He turned to Luna. "...Well, you."

"I'm certain that about everypony in Canterlot wants to see my sister," said Celestia, "Why these two?"

"Well, the first one," he replied, "I thought you might *want* to see..."

\*\*\*

*Thirty-seven minutes earlier...*

Pony Joe was gasping for breath, pacing around the donut shop floor while listening to the spastic flurry of hoofbeats on the front door.

"Okay," he murmured to himself, "Okay, PJ, what now?"

He looked around his shop, from the front counter, to the thumping door, to each of the locked and covered windows, and back to the counter.

"...That was helpful," he muttered angrily, "Come on, think!"

He paced in a circle around the central triad of tables, the very same which he'd had to replace not days before.

"The roof?" he thought aloud, "...Nah, wouldn't work. Teleporting?" A few seconds passed as he considered it. "...Who am I kidding? I'd make it ten feet, at best." About the sixth time around the tables, he paused, looked up, and grimaced. "...Aw, no. No, no bucking way." Without ceasing his self-objections, Pony Joe trotted slowly to the back of his shop and to a familiar chute, gingerly opening it and looking down the black void of discarded pastries. He sighed.

"...Well," he said, "It wouldn't be the first time."

\*\*\*

“...Hi, Luna.”

The star-maned princess blinked, observing the trash-covered donut salespony standing before her. There were violet grape-jelly stains along the side of his apron, sugar-glaze smeared through his coat, butterscotch cream under one eye, and, for some reason unbeknownst even to him, a banana peel hanging from his wrinkled paper hat. “How did -”

“Don’t ask,” he interrupted with a sheepish grin.

Luna returned the smile. “I was going to ask how you made it to the castle.”

“It’s not obvious?”

This drew a chuckle from Luna. “I meant after that.”

“It wasn’t as tricky as you’d think. Not many ponies were outside the castle; your guards were making sure of that.”

The royal guard pony, still in the doorway, interjected: “The crowds were getting unruly, and we were forced to disperse them. We were about to send him away, as well, but one of the gate patrols recognized him. I decided that it would be best to let you deal with him personally.”

Luna turned to the armored unicorn, and nodded. “Well done, I’ll see that your diligence is rewarded.” She paused. “And you said that there was somepony else?”

“Ah, yes,” he confirmed, “I’m sure that you’ll want to deal with this one, personally, too...”

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*Approximately one hour earlier...*

“You’re insane.”

Snapshot only smiled at Dee. “Come on, it’s like any other job we’ve done.”

Dee paused, staring at her long-time partner incredulously. “Are you even listening to yourself, Snapshot? This is Canterlot Castle you’re thinking about!” Taking a breath, she continued. “And how do you plan on getting inside, anyways?”

Snapshot just stood there with a dumb smile.

“...I take it you have a way in, then?”

He nodded, then began to make his way to the office door. “Come on, time’s wasting.”

Dee sat for a moment more, and sighed, chuckling softly to herself. “You crazy foal.”



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Dee, mouth agape, stared back and forth between Snapshot and the metal chute hanging above the rancid metal dumpster before her. "You're joking. *Please* tell me that you're joking."

"Hey, I'm not saying it'll be fun." Climbing onto the edge of the dumpster, he added, "But a story like this doesn't come around every day."

Dee shook her head, smiling. "You're insane, Snapshot."

"So you've told me. Now, are you coming, or not?"

"Um..." She pointed a hoof at his wings. "I'm not quite sure if I even can."

Puzzled, Snapshot looked at his wings, then at the chute. "Oh, right." Undeterred, he turned back to his old friend. "Tell you what: when I get out, I'll tell you all about it."

"Oh..."

Snapshot's smile shrunk. "What is it?"

"Nothing," replied Dee in an unusually apologetic tone, "It's just...I've got plans tonight."

Snapshot felt his heart skip a beat. "Oh." Within moments, however, his smile made a triumphant return. "No worries, then. See you at work tomorrow?"

"Alright. And Snapshot..."

He paused, one hoof already in the dumpster. "Yeah?"

Dee sighed, taking an unusually concerned tone. "Just be careful. Alright, old buddy?"

Snapshot scoffed. "Trust me, Dee; I'll be fine."

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Snapshot stood trembling in the doorway. He looked pitiful with caviar streaked across one wing, creamed carrots over the other, salad dressing smeared on one side of his neck, and, inexplicably, a banana peel hanging off his fedora.

"We found him when he was walking out of the kitchen," reported the guard, "Doesn't seem anything more than a nosy paparazzi, though."

Celestia, any essence of even the lightest amusement vanished from her face, leaned over on her front hooves. "Paparazzi, eh? Well, then, I -"

Before Celestia could finish, Luna urgently interrupted, "Did you have anything with...with..." She levitated the magazine up and to the terrified pegasus. "With this?"

"Y-y-yes," he stammered, "I-I mean, no! I mean, kind of..."

Luna glared. "You're not coming through..."

"I...I'm Snapshot, your majesty. I just take the pictures."

The admission left Luna suddenly unsure of her next response. "Just...the pictures?" she echoed.

"Y-yes, Princess."

Luna stood there, silent. Celestia cleared her throat. "Well, then...guards, please escort him to the dungeon while Luna and I discuss his punishment."

"Yes ma'am." Turning to Snapshot, he barked, "You heard her majesty. Come on!"

As Snapshot was escorted from the room and the door closed, Celestia turned to her sister. "So, then. Your opinion, Luna?"

Luna frowned, her brow furrowed. "I..." She paused, then trotted out the door before saying, "I need to think."

The room was silent for a moment. After that moment, Celestia turned to Pony Joe, nudging her head towards the door. "Go on, then."

Pony Joe nodded. "Yes, your highness." He started towards the door, then paused and turned back to Celestia. "Can I wash up first?"

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Pony Joe found Luna sitting in one of the private courtyards, sullenly staring at a nearby fountain. He trotted up, having discarded his paper hat and left his apron in the castle laundry room (with Celestia's permission). Awkwardly, he spoke. "Hi, Luna."

She looked up, chuckling in spite of herself. "You certainly took your time getting here."

He returned the laugh. "I wasn't gonna be cuddling with a mare of royalty while there's a banana peel hanging off my head," he replied jokingly.

Luna's sulking was immediately replaced by confusion. "What is this 'cuddling' that you speak of?"

Pony Joe's lower jaw dropped slightly. "Erm..."

"Well?" asked Luna persistently.

Pony Joe stammered, "W-well, um...cuddling is when...it's two ponies who...uh..." He sighed, then boldly declared: "Let me show you."

Luna watched as he sat next to her, and her eyes widened and her heart raced as he softly put his neck over hers, holding her close. She began blushing madly, almost as madly as he was.

"...S-so...i-it's like a...a hug, then?" she stuttered, "Exc-cept from the side and...longer?"

Pony Joe laughed. "You're adorable."

Luna's eyes narrowed slightly, contrasting with her pink cheeks. "N-not to mention taller, older, more powerful, a-and...oh, stop laughing!"

His chuckling softened, but failed to stop. "Sorry, Luna. It's just not everyday that you get away with calling one of the royal sisters 'adorable.'"

Luna was silent for a moment, then burst into a giggling fit, her face still a raging pink. "Point taken."

The silence stretched on for several minutes, the blush in Luna's cheeks slowly diminishing as she grew more comfortable in this 'cuddling' position. Finally, Pony Joe asked the burning question: "What now?"

Luna frowned, and sighed. "I don't know, PJ. What they wrote about me was beyond insulting..."

"I'm sure it wasn't *that* bad," replied Pony Joe somewhat stupidly.

Luna chuckled. "'Princess Luna is also rumored to indulge in perverse practices involving a quartet of socks, an abacus, and a tennis racket during her nights with Pony Joe.' And that was hardly the worst of it..."

"...All right," Pony Joe conceded, "So it was that bad. But I'm not sure sending that poor guy to the dungeon is a good move."

Surprisingly, Luna's reaction was to laugh. "I miss something?" asked Pony Joe.

Luna shook her head. "No, no, you're right..." She snickered once more before resuming her semi-somber tone. "Still, though, I don't...I'm not..." She sighed. "Things were so much simpler a thousand years ago."

Pony Joe coughed out a laugh. "Yeah, back when bathing was unhealthy and leeches worked for everything."

Luna looked up, defensively proclaiming, "I'll have you know, I personally made great strides in the use of leeches to cure the Vapours!"

Pony Joe stared, confused. "Err...Vapours?"

Luna sighed. "Nevermind. My point is that a millennium ago, nopony would even think this situation possible, let alone common."

Pony Joe shrugged. "I'm not saying your wrong. Times just change, I guess."

Luna scoffed. "No need to tell me." Semi-reluctantly, she uncurled herself from under Pony Joe and began pacing around him, her eyes locked on her cyclical path. "From the moment I returned, I've faced

change after change. I find myself bewildered by modern entertainment, I still cringe at the sight of unshorn fetlocks..." She paused, taking a moment to look back at Pony Joe. "You couldn't even imagine what happened the first time I tried using a microwave." She turned her gaze forward again, and her trot continued. "But I've adapted as best as I possibly can. In fact, one of my most difficult adjustments is now possibly my favorite time of the year."

"And that would be?" asked an intently listening Pony Joe.

Luna paused once more, smiling at the memory before once again taking up her pace. "Nightmare Night, to tell you the truth. At first, I could not help but to find the concept positively abhorrent. Annually, ponies across Equestria would make a mockery of their princess, equating her - erm, me, to the manticores hiding under their beds. At least, that was what I had feared. Within one night, however, my initial impressions were proven false. I had desired love and admiration, and as shown to me, that's precisely what I was receiving. But what's happened today..." Once more, she paused, and she closed her eyes. "I see no redeeming quality. What these ponies have done is slanderous, it's ignorant..."

Pony Joe noticed a growing shakiness in Luna's voice.

"...It's spiteful..." Luna's eyelids grew tighter together. "...It's cruel," she said, a rim of moisture forming on her eyelashes.

Pony Joe quickly realized that he had just become quite possibly the only pony alive to witness Luna - the revered and all-powerful princess of the night - be brought to tears. Tentatively, he trotted up, gently putting his neck over hers.

Luna curled into Pony Joe, shaking her head as she stemmed the flow of tears. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, "A princess should remain more composed."

"Says the pony that obliterated her office not days ago."

Luna laughed in spite of herself. "My point exactly. Since my return, the very essence of calm has all but eluded me. I can't help but to almost constantly feel anxious, or hostile, or bewildered, or...or..." She laughed softly. "Or in this case, loquacious."

"Well, what do you mean?"

Luna sighed. "To tell the truth, I can't quite put my hoof on what's been causing it."

"...No, what does 'loquacious' mean?"

"Oh." Luna paused. "Erm, I believe that a proper synonym would be 'talkative.'"

Pony Joe nodded. "Right." Pony Joe took a step back from Luna, looking at her with a reassuring smile. "And I get it, Luna. I've been there."

Luna's expression morphed into one of mildly confused skepticism (as well it should have).

"...I'm not trying to say I've been through anything you have," he added, "Kind of hard to match a generation gap spanning a thousand years, even I know that. But either way, I'm familiar with those feelings. That things are passing too quickly, that nothing's making sense..." His smile faltered, and it seemed as if he were staring into the distance. "...Wanting everything to go back to how it was before."

Luna cocked her head to one side. "...Is there something that you're wishing to tell me?"

Pony Joe's eyes immediately refocused, and his smile returned. "It's nothing," he lied. Changing the subject, he asked, "So, have you decided what to with that paparazzi pony?"

Luna stood still for a moment, then nodded.

"Good." As they trotted towards the courtyard entrance together, Pony Joe couldn't help but to ask, "What's this dungeon of yours like, anyways?"

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The dungeon, as it turned out, was a light gray, 8-by-10 cell placed between the Lost and Found and the Canterlot Castle Souvenir Emporium. Its original and primary purpose had been to detain shoplifters, but Celestia could hardly resist the archaic title. Its current occupant was a very specific fedora-wearing pegasus that smelled vaguely of moldy alfalfa and rotten bananas. Currently, he was passing the time with a decidedly racy magazine that one of the guards had been kind enough to lend him. He maintained, however, that it was 'just for the articles.'

He looked up at the sound of the door opening, reflexively obscuring the magazine's front cover. In trotted two royal guards, one of whom stood at the side while the other one unlocked the cell.

Snapshot looked at both of them, then finally asked, "Am I leaving, then?"

The guard at the side nodded, declaring, "You're free to go, by order of Princess Luna herself."

Snapshot stood up, trotting out of the cell before setting the magazine on a nearby desk. "Well, good-bye, boys. It's been..." He searched for the

proper word. "...Gray?" Receiving no response, he trotted hurriedly out the door, and after that, out of the Canterlot Castle gates.

Within yards of leaving, Snapshot saw a familiar, sandy-maned pony napping against a tree trunk. Smiling, he strode up to her, waking her up with: "What, your date get canceled?"

Dee snapped awake and looked at Snapshot, quiet for a few seconds. For a moment, Snapshot swore that he saw relief in her eyes. Immediately after, however, she bolted to her feet and began furiously smacking Snapshot over the head. "You *moron*," she spat, "You big, bucking *idiot!*"

Snapshot covered his head, trying to ward off Dee's blows. "Ow! Dee, would you - ow! By Celestia, Dee, what's - ow! - what's your problem?"

Dee ceased her assault, taking a step back from Snapshot. "You have no idea, do you? Oh, you idiot..." She began pacing over the same three feet of grass. "You couldn't have just waited for Luna to leave the castle, or started on another story. No, you had to go and break into Canterlot-bucking-Castle!"

Snapshot chuckled, nursing one of his several sore spots. "Come on, Dee. The worst thing in there was the coffee."

Dee froze, glaring at Snapshot, then sighing sadly. "No, it's not just -" She paused. "It's not that. It's...Mr. Bugle wants to see you when we get back."

Snapshot was still for a few seconds, but slowly and surely, realization crept into his mind. "Oh." For the second time that day, Snapshot's heart skipped a beat.

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*The next evening, about closing time...*

Pony Joe was calmly cleaning off the bar once again, happy to have had a relatively quiet day. Some ponies still had asked him about the whole Luna fiasco, but there weren't swarms of ponies pounding on his door. He looked up at the empty tables, smiling slightly as his gaze crossed the middle three.

*Ring-a-ding-ding.*

Pony Joe looked up. "Sorry, pal, I'm about to close up - oh." He chuckled. "Didn't think I'd be seeing you again."

The blue-maned pegasus with the stained fedora didn't say a word, but instead pulled up a stool to the bar, keeping his gaze downward. "Get

me a double-chocolate cream-filled donut with extra sprinkles,” he said sullenly, “And keep ‘em coming.”

Pony Joe grabbed a plate and floated out one of the donuts in the display, setting it in front of Snapshot. “Long day?”

Snapshot sighed, taking a large bite out of his donut. “Longest day of my life.”