

Brotherhood of the Moon

Chapter 13

It was still evening in the city of Canterlot. Ponies were abundant in the streets, making their way home for the night, trying to find a place to buy dinner, or just taking a nightly walk to admire the sky. Firefly even thought she saw an astronomer as she darted along the rooftops, jumping, rolling, and climbing over the tops of houses and buildings.

She was still a bit saddened by her encounter with Twilight, but for the most part she wasn't dwelling on it. Dash herself was a bit troubled by the encounter herself, picturing in her mind the sadness of having to run away from her own friends without so much as a "goodbye", possibly never to see them again. The mere idea was depressing, and both ponies fought to push the thought to the back of their minds for now.

Firefly dropped down from the roofs as she approached her destination, The Apple Core. It was probably better to enter the already highly suspicious thieves' guild from the front entrance. Unwanted attention was the last thing she needed at the moment. Right now all she needed was to walk along the roads as inconspicuously as possible.

As if to personally deny her hope for normality, a pair of hooves suddenly appeared from a back alley as Firefly passed by. The two appendages grabbed the mare and pulled her into the shadows, pushing her up against a wall. Her eyes adjusting to the dark shadows of the alleyway, she turned to see the hooves belonged to a thief pony; and earth pony no less.

"What the hay are-" Firefly began before being cut off by the thief's hoof, now covering her mouth. The thief moved his free hoof to make a "shh" motion with his mouth, then tried his best to press himself up against the wall like Firefly. With the idea of silence in mind, Firefly began hearing a mumble coming from up ahead. She had to really concentrate, but could make out roughly what was being said.

"...not even worth the time. Ya'd think we would've found the rats earlier with them advertising around like that."

"Yeah well, it wasn't really that obvious either, hay, could've fooled me."

"That's because ya'd take a drink over an arrest, ya bloody drunkard."

"Is that really such a bad thing?"

"...yea, I guess I would to." As the talking grew louder, Firefly saw the source of the voices reach them. Two city guards on patrol passed by the alley's exit and continued down the street without noticing the two outlaws, their talking now fading into silence as they moved further away.

Something was wrong. Not only did their conversation seem suspicious, but city guards generally ignored the back-lots of Canterlot, especially this far out. Why two guards would be on patrol here was out of Firefly's reach of explanation. She turned back to the thief pony who'd pulled her out of sight from the guards. He let out his previously held breath, heaving a sigh of relief as he did.

"What was that about?" Firefly asked.

"Thank Celestia they're gone. I think we may be the only two left in this area." He responded absentmindedly.

"What? What happened?" Firefly asked, now a bit worried.

"You weren't here huh? I don't know what happened, must've been a traitor among us or something, but somehow they found us!" he said, distress once again filling his eyes.

"What?" Firefly half-gasped.

"The guards found us out! Somehow they know the pub was a thieves' guild! They beat their way in, arrested anyone they could get their hooves on, and took them all away in a caged cart, including the guild master!"

"Cortland's been arrested?" Firefly inquired. The thief nodded.

"Aye." he said simply. "The ol' Apple Core's nearly choked with armored guards, and they're patrolling the area to catch any other stray thieves."

Firefly didn't know what to do. It seemed that justice had finally been served to the band of thieves residing in The Apple Core. Deep inside, she felt the law abiding citizen telling her she should be happy, that they got what they deserved. And yet, she couldn't feel anything but worry. Yes, they were thieves. Yes, they are guilty of their charges. And yes, on any day before this she would have snickered to herself about how effective karma is in repaying these who do wrong. But she couldn't just leave them be. She had to do something.

*"...Surely ah can trust a member of the assassin brotherhood, right?"
'You know about the brotherhood?' Firefly asked.
'Well of course ah do.' He replied, lifting up his front right hoof and, to Firefly's surprise, exposing a branded assassin insignia. 'Ah'm a member.'*

'Like I said.' piped the thief behind them. 'You're just like us, a child of the night.'

That was it. She had to help them now. If not because they had helped her out, or because they'd been so kind, than above all else, these were her assassin brothers. She never fully understood the connection she was supposed to have with her fellow assassins, but she felt it now.

Applejack had been right; this was her family now. And Firefly was to be damned before she was going to let her family go again; not to the Templars, not to anypony.

"Where did the cart go, do you have any idea?" Firefly said to the thief with a now pressing urgency.

"Uh, toward the Merchant's district I believe, but you aren't going to try and fight the guards are you?" he replied.

"I have to go, now." Firefly took off down the alley, getting a running start before kicking the wall and making her accent.

"Are you crazy? There'll be tons of guards there! And civilians! There's no way you'll make it out!" The guard yelled behind her.

"Of course I will!" Firefly shouted back from the top of the building. "I am an assassin after all."

"Hang the bloody snakes, break their necks!"

"Kill the dirty thieves!"

"Let them have what they deserve!"

These were only some of the shouts of anger Firefly could hear from the crowd ahead of her.

She recognized her location as the city square; the large expanse of flat tile floor that took up the space in front of the a famous basilica. This had been the plaza where she'd first tried to kill Gilded Sword, and where Applejack had saved her. The place seemed to regularly attract misery, as the angry mob that took up most of the square was cheering and standing in front of a large wooden platform that was raised above the floor about 3 feet. On the platform were two guards, and what appeared to be a high ranking Templar official. Strung along the top of the platform's frame was a set of ropes that draped down to end in nooses. Held inside the gallows' hold were an indiscriminate group of criminals, chained and bound, the ropes fastened around their necks as they waited their demise. From this distance, none were totally recognizable, but Firefly could just make out one of the colts' bright orange mane and yellow coat. Cortland stood tall with his fellow thieves, about to be hanged for public view.

No time to hesitate. Firefly walked toward the crowd at a walking pace, but still moved with a little more urgency than most. Guards lined the outer edges of the plaza, and archers stood ready to fire all along the roofs. Wedged in the bustling crowd, Firefly would be invisible. That is, until she made her first move, but she knew from previous experience that the very moment she acted out of line the crowd would recede and isolate her from the rest, and every guard in view would be alerted to her position. It looked quite impossible, even ignoring the numerous guards surrounding the area, the two unicorns on the platform itself were heavily armored, and by the strange circular markings on their helmets that surrounded their exposed horns, she guessed these guards must have been specialists in combat spells. Still, her tactics and strategies were only secondary in her mind; her focus was on saving her allies' lives. She continually pushed through the crowd, assertively pushing other ponies aside as she worked her way to the front.

The official at the front of the stage magically levitated a scroll out of his saddlebags and unfurled it in front of him. He cleared his throat before dictating the scroll as loudly as he possibly could.

"By decree of The Solar House of The Royal Equestrian Court in Canterlot; Cortland Amadeus Apple, Swift Marquis Skies, Roller Demetrius Stone, and Vance Archer DeLarossa are charged with the crimes of robbery, murder, evasion of arrest, and treason." Despite the emphasis he put on the last accusation, the official carried the formality out in a very dull tone, as if he was reciting a list of upcoming social events. "Therefore, these four listed are hereby sentenced to execution via hanging, to be carried out in public view for all to bear witness." The crowd's roars of agitation amplified at the listing of the crimes, and even more so at the dooming of their humiliation and death. Firefly tried her best to retain a somewhat calm composure as she fought her way through the group of aroused locals, but due to the finality of the official's tone she found herself all but sprinting her way towards the source of the booming voice.

"Ya no-good rotten mules, ya'll' pay for this, ah swear it!" Cortland exploded from his bondage. "Just a buncha corrupt bastards, all of ya! We didn't even get a trial, ya'll can't prove nothing!" This outbreak only fanned the fire of the crowd's fury, as more and more voices cried out for the earth pony's killing. She couldn't hold back any longer, Firefly was running as fast as she could through the angry mob, shoving and throwing pedestrians to the floor as she desperately made her way forward. The guards at the head of the group began to take notice.

Rolling up the scroll, the official stored it away and moved to a wooden level on one side of the stage. His horn formed a sparkled glow as he telekinetically gripped the handle and prepared to drop the floor from under the four condemned, leaving their fates in the unforgiving hands of gravity.

"May Celestia have mercy on your darkened souls, I now say to thee, face the law!"

The tension rose as the four thieves braced for their untimely demise. The crowd watched intently to witness the criminals' punishment. The official turned his attention to flipping the lever and sending these four ponies to the great beyond. And all the while, a white figure sailed above them all. Like a low flying cloud bringing a slight rainstorm, or perhaps a pure white angel descending onto the four souls to be executed. Inexplicably the official turned and looked skyward to see this white apparition float down. However, the figure grew dark, and more shadowed. Now it seemed more like a menacing thundercloud, or a dreadful angel of death. It soon dawned upon the official that this almost ethereal force was directing its descent toward him, enveloping him in its mystery, swallowing him up. Where did it come from? The sky? The crowd? Was he imagining it? Was it even of this world? He would never know the answers to any of these questions.

As Firefly landed on the Templar's body, her hidden blade pierced his heart, severing his life as he prepared to take the lives of four others. The glow around his horn faded, as did the telekinetic glow around the wooden lever. With a single, fluid motion, Firefly unsheathed her sword and cut the noose of the four criminals, releasing them from their looming deaths. Cortland gasped for breath, his lungs taking time to realize they did indeed still function.

"What now?" He asked looking up at Firefly, his hooves still chained together. The assassin pegasus looked around. Sure enough, two menacingly crackling balls of energy were now formed at the tips of the two guard's horns, both aimed for the five other ponies on the platform. Elsewhere, guards drew long lengths of steel and charged for the central plaza. Up above, Crossbows clicked into a firing position almost simultaneously from all directions.

"Now...now..." Firefly muttered hopelessly. It seemed like it was all too late. Enemies on all sides, two extremely powerful attacks on the verge of reaching them from point blank, countless patrol groups now focusing on their location. There was surely no method of escape.

"...we disappear."

Both unicorns finished their incantations. The spheres of blazing fire propelled forward with blinding speed toward the five outlaws. At a single call to fire, a thousand arrows and crossbow bolts flew from the rooftops at once. The central point of Canterlot Square exploded into a deafening boom as a cloud of smoke enveloped the entire gallows.

Lagging behind the extremely fast-paced actions, the audience only now began to shriek and wail in confusion and terror. A number of mares in the crowd that were particularly weak of heart fainted to be carried by their accompanying stunned civilians. Slowly the smoke cleared, and the damage could be fully surveyed. To everyone's surprise, not a single pony could be seen on the wooden platform. As the now even more confused ponies searched their surrounding area, their gaze fell to the outer edges of the plaza, and found the two unicorn battlemages lying dead at either side. From the burn wounds and distance their corpses flew, it could be concluded that both had been hit by the others spell,

and knocked across the square. The convicts and their hooded savior however, were nowhere to be found. Curiously enough though, the lever to activate the gallows was now thrown to the active position, and as such, the floor beneath where the four nooses hung previously was swung down, exposing a hole to the square below. Had any guards thought to search inside this opening, they'd have found that the wooden platform had been placed right above a sewer entrance on the ground, the cover of which now lay askew, as if somepony had entered it recently and re-placed it in a haste.

"Find them! Find where they went!" The shouts of angry guards rose from the streets below and up to the upper heights of Canterlot's cityscape. Chaos engulfed the street below; ponies screaming, yelling, and crying in one big symphony of disorder and confusion. A hoof reached up from above and grasped the edge of the roof, and then proceeded to pull the rest of its body up to join it. Firefly slowly made her way over to a flat section of roof that was next to a wall of the taller building next to it. She leaned her weight on the wall, resting her fatigue there, Four other ponies following her to the roof and then over to the wall. All four wiped their brows in near-unison, and for a long moment, the only sound they made was the panting of each trying to catch their breath.

Finally, Cortland mustered up enough strength to barely voice his ideas.

"What..." he said gasping to Firefly, "...what was...that?" Still a bit tired from running through the extensive Canterlot sewers, Firefly couldn't respond immediately. Instead, she reached around into a pouch at her waist and opened it, removing its contents. She held out two small spheres, each covered with a silvery coating and with a small pull-fuse hanging from their tops, making them look like some sort of metallic breed of cherries. Cortland seemed to recognize what they were instantly. "Smoke bombs?" he asked. Firefly only nodded in confirmation. She took a deeper breath and swallowed, her breathing pattern now, for the most part, normal.

"Gifts from a friend." she replied simply, putting Posey's little secrets back in their pouch. Cortland put on his usual smirk at this remark, and Firefly silently gave a sigh of relief; she was beginning to think she would not see him wear it again.

"Ah would very much like tah meet this friend'a yers one day." he said, then got up to look out onto the Canterlot skyline. Firefly joined him, both staring out at the city's lights and shapes. Another long moment passed, both ponies lost in the night-time cityscape that lay out before them.

"Beautiful..." Cortland said quietly.

"...what?" Firefly replied, blushing a bit.

"The city: It may be a hell-hole during the day, but at night, all the towers and spires, ah swear ah've never seen anything more...beautiful." He replied astonished.

"Oh." Firefly said simply. Half of her mind had thought the remark was directed at her. She returned he gaze to the city. She had to admit, there was something about Canterlot's spirals and gleaming towers that made the city look absolutely stunning in the low light. For all the trouble the city had caused her, Firefly had to appreciate that.

"Ah wanna thank ya Firefly. Ah don't know- actually, Ah do know what would'a happened if ya hadn't shown up when ya did." Cortland said, turning to the mare.

"It was nothing, after all, you're my assassin brother, we're in this together, right?" Firefly said casually.

"Ah still can't thank you enough. Ya've done us a lotta good since ya got here, and ah appreciate that, ah mean it, from the bottom of mah heart." Cortland was obviously very grateful, and Firefly was happy to help. But she still felt the need to ask...

"Cortland, I've always kind of wondered, why be a thief?" She began. "I mean, you're an honorable stallion, you're nice and compassionate and honest enough, why would you steal?" Cortland didn't take any offense to the question, and even began to laugh a little.

"Firefly, there's a concept we always try tah establish before anypony joins the thieves guild." Cortland replied. "We may be thieves, but we're not bandits. Bandits are evil ponies who think tha easiest way tah get something is tah take it from somepony else. They don't care how hard that pony worked for it, they don't care what it'll do tah them, they just take it and run. And that's not what we do." He severed his gaze from the city scape and looked back at his comrades. "We only take what we need, nothin more, and always take it from somepony who don't deserve it. There's a lotta rich ponies in Canterlot, but there's a lotta poor ones too. Some of these wealthy ponies help the less fortunate, they try tah donate money for food or shelter, but sadly, that's not the case with most." His face twisted into a frown momentarily. "Greed is an issue that plagues this city; most of these rich an high-class families don't do squat with it: They walk around, seein' little fillies and colts dyin' of hunger in the pourin' rain, an just point their snouts higher an strut the other way. It's enough tah make me sick just talkin' about it."

At this point, he was visibly shaking with rage; however, he calmed himself and regained his normal expression. "We thieves just force tha degenerates to do what they should'a been doin' all along. We steal from tha rich only tah aid the poor. When we take money or valuables from Templar bureaucrats, we spend every last bit on helpin' out a family who's sufferin' in the back streets, or begging in the alleyways. We're just lookin' out for those who need it." He stood proudly on the edge of the roof, as if the city before him was his domain, his territory to protect and sustain. His city.

"Wow..." was all Firefly could respond with, "That's just...amazing. I never thought you guys were that... moral." She felt ashamed she ever doubted their intentions. The ponies who attacked her in the forest were nothing like these ponies. The allies she had thought so badly of were not what they appeared to be on the surface. They weren't thieves, they were heroes.

"Heh, well. Honesty runs in the family." Cortland said before turning to his fellow thieves. "But enough'a that, you filled yer end of tha bargain, and then some. Now it's time for me tah fill my end." He nodded to one of his subordinates, and the pegasus nodded back, unfurling his wings and approaching Firefly. "Go easy on 'er Swift; she's probably not used tah flyin'." Firefly had almost forgotten about her mission after so long. It was time for her to finally take her revenge, and after hearing Cortland's story, she wished for the corrupt politician to pay now more than ever. As the pegasus Firefly remembered from the hanging as Swift Skies grabbed hold of her, Cortland took out a small green tube. It was decorated with an intricate pattern, and had a string tied to one end.

"What's that?" Firefly asked curiously.

"A gift from a friend." Cortland replied with a sly look. He pointed the tube skyward and pulled on the string.

A loud "pop" rang out, hurting Firefly's ears from its close range and un-expectance.

A small ball of burning material shot up instantly, and after a few moments, a brilliant explosion spawned multiple globes of green light that floated slowly downward. All along the horizon of the city, more pops were heard, as multiple other pyro technics exploded in the sky and bathed the city in a mystical green glow. The colorful bursts were visible for miles, and lingered in the air for about a minute before sluggishly fading away. This was no doubt the signal that would alert thieves all around the city to distract the guards. Even now, Firefly could almost hear faint sounds of steel clashing and guards shouting.

"Good luck assassin, ya gonna need it." Cortland said confidently.

"Don't worry, I'll get this done. For the brotherhood." Firefly responded.

"Oh please, do ya really expect me tah believe yer doin this on Master's orders?" Cortland said. Firefly almost yelped from the surprise of being exposed.

"Wha...what are you talking-"

"Now ah may be young, but ah wasn't born yesterday. I've been in this business long enough to know ol' Steelwing would never send a rookie on a high-level assassination mission for her fist run." Cortland said laughing. He placed his hoof on Firefly's shoulder and gave a more compassionate face. "Look, ah don't know why yer doin' this, but ah trust ya have yer reasons, and ah'm not gonna hold ya back. Make sure ya give 'em an extra kick in the flank for me, ya hear?" Firefly was frankly stunned. How long had he known? Did he ever believe her story? Regardless, she eventually returned his smirk and nodded.

"I'll make sure of it." she assured. Cortland returned her nod.

"Give 'em hell pardner." With that, Swift began to beat his wings up and down repeatedly. The extra weight caused the pair to have a very slow acceleration, but eventually, they took the skies high above. With a large flap, the pegasai caught a gust of wind and soared away, their path headed for the all but impenetrable Gold family's stronghold. Tonight, the fortress would finally be infiltrated.