

Chapter 1 - In Which I Try To Make It Through the Morning

There's only one thing in the world worse than waking up hung over. And that thing is waking up hung over to an empty bedroom.

I came to long before I opened my eyes, and I opened my eyes long before I was actually awake. Part of it was because the bed was warm and I couldn't remember whether I paid the heating bill this month, but mostly it was because I felt like somepony had beaten me over the head with a steel-plated two-by-four. That would be the gin coming back to bite me in the ass. Possibly a bit of the scotch too.

Some back alley of my mind picked up on the significant lack of body heat next to me and filed it away to be analyzed some other time, when my brain wasn't trying to dig its way out of my skull with a pickaxe. Later, I'd probably feel sad or something about once again waking up alone after a night of voyeuristic sin, but right now all I could remember was a frizzy red mane and a lacy black shawl that smelled alarmingly like limburger cheese. Coral was her name, or something like that. Maybe Cherry. Cauliflower?

I made the critical mistake of moving, and the choir of angels inside my head made sure I'd regret it for the next two hours. *Screw it*, I muttered into the pillow as a medley of power tools and rabid bears chimed in for the refrain. She was gone anyway. No sense moping around about something I wouldn't get back.

Candy. That was her name. Candy Heart. It still didn't explain the cheese, but it was better than nothing.

After giving the bears a few minutes to clear out, I went into my standard hangover operating procedure. This morning, that consisted of flailing my legs around until I could slip my rear end and then my forelegs over the edge of the bed without moving my head off the pillow. After that, there wasn't much else I could do besides move slowly and thank the stars the bed was next to the bathroom, so I scraped my tongue over my bone-dry lips and lifted my head up with only a minimal amount of cursing. This wasn't a world-record hangover, then. That was good. The record was set on Winter Solstice Eve four years ago, when I spent six hours naming each and every one of the carpet fibers in the six-by-eight inch square of floor I could see from where I had collapsed around four and slept until around one the next afternoon. Today, I just ran into the doorjamb on the way out of the bedroom and wished I could go back and meet the pony who invented drinking, so I could gouge his eyes out with a rusty icepick. So all things considered, not a bad hangover at all.

Getting all the way into the shower would require many things, including the spatial awareness to actually wedge my whole body inside it, so I just settled for sticking my head under the stream of lukewarm water until the roaring in my ears died down into a purr. Dripping wet from the neck up and eyes still crusted over with Luna-only-knew-what, I swiveled around to

face the mirror and tried to blink enough to get the glass to stop shimmering so brightly. Once it did, I gave myself a once-over just for kicks.

As was the pattern for the morning, things could've been worse. My coat was filthy and matted in more than one place, but at least none of it was dyed any color other than its natural Venetian red, and the symbol on my flank--a magnifying glass with a brown wooden handle--didn't look like it had been enhanced by any enthusiastic bar patrons. My mane, freshly soaked from the shower, was plastered all over my forehead in straggly brown clumps, but besides that looked normal enough as well. That left my teeth. I cracked a smile that ended up falling just short of a wince, and counted forty-two. All clear on this front, Brick. Time to get yourself cleaned up and ready for a bright, shiny new day of counting the hours until bedtime again. Be still, my heart.

The shower was still running and the water coming out of it wasn't getting any warmer, so I decided to skip the whole full-body wash thing and instead settle for a mouthful of tap water from the sink and the last fluoride-treated mint leaf from the jar I'd been meaning to refill for at least a week. With my headache starting to fade, I was able to think clearly enough to remember that I was hungry and there wasn't any food in my apartment, but not quite clearly enough to stop me from staring bleakly into the fridge at the impressive amount of didley-squat occupying the shelves. I also noticed that there didn't appear to be any cold air coming out either. Perfect. At least the milk had already gone bad days ago.

I paced around the room for a second looking for loose crumbs, then flopped on the couch and checked to see whether the cracks in the ceilings had gotten any bigger overnight. When I saw that they hadn't, I let out a sigh. Ten minutes out of bed, and I had completely exhausted all but two possibilities for the day: stay here on this couch until I blacked out from hunger, or go in to the office and be a productive member of society. My throat twinged, and for a long moment the room spun circles around me. Starvation was actually looking like a half-decent idea at the moment.

But my stomach, the traitor, could only hold out for a few minutes. Last night's dinner was still as fuzzy as all the rest of last night, so I didn't really even know how long it'd been since I'd eaten anything. The answer my gut gave went something along the lines of "way too damn long", and that was good enough for me. With a groan from me and a louder groan from the couch, I rolled onto my hooves and started out, catching the strap of my satchel in my teeth as I passed it and swinging it onto my back before I nosed the door open and stepped out into the hallway.

Where the first thing I saw was a neatly stenciled piece of paper tacked over my peephole, with a heading written in neon-red ink that started out with the words "NOTICE OF EVICTION" and pretty much went downhill from there. Today was just going to be one of those days.

There are some ponies who like to confront their problems head-on. Y'know, beat up their critics, chase down the schlub who picks their pocket at the train station, all that gung-ho

stallion-type shit. For somepony like me, meanwhile, everything has two solutions. The first one is reasonable, stoic debate, and the second one is drinking. It's generally very difficult to negotiate with an eviction notice, so I didn't see the point in getting all worked up about it. Besides, it wasn't like this was the first time it'd ever happened. This was Manehattan and I was the kind of schmuck who didn't know well enough to leave; the only thing in this city tighter than the money is the waistlines of all the upper class entrepreneurs who putter around in Dressage Park like little pressed and starched robots. That was the image everypony seemed to have of Manehattan: rich, cultured, tasteful, refined. Me, I lived in the real world, where the rent is cheap, the sauce is cheaper, and any building that doesn't have a homeless colt sleeping in the alley behind it is pretty much Canterlot Castle. The homeless colt behind my building was named Chester. Nice guy, actually, so long as you're upwind.

Oh, that's right: it wasn't *my* building anymore, was it? Well, such is life, I said to the empty hallway, right before swearing under my breath. You try to do one decent thing in this world, and all you get from it is a never-ending headache and a neat little piece of paper telling you to buzz off and die, with warmest regards from the Management. They're always so polite when they kick you to the curb in Manehattan. Makes me miss Fillydelphia sometimes; when they kicked ponies to the curb, it usually involved actual kicking. I took one last look at the notice, and cussed again just to make sure it heard me.

"Well, good morning to you too, Dogwood."

I nearly bit my tongue in half snapping my jaw closed. My neighbors were what the brochures would call "affectionate", and I called "nosy as hell". Of course, this time it was mostly my fault, considering I'd been thinking aloud for the last thirty seconds or so and had just now noticed it. Funny how I only ever do that when there are other ponies around to hear me.

"Howdy," I muttered at Mrs. Willow, who's roughly nine hundred years old and has been convinced for the last two of them that I'm her grown son Dogwood. I've never had the heart to tell her that her real son runs a mattress store across town and has his picture in the dictionary next to the word "asshole", so I mostly just take the free cookies and run. She's sweet enough, I guess, but I didn't think I'd miss her once I moved out. By the time I went through the nonexistent list of ponies I would miss once I moved out, she was talking again.

"Oh, I saw that nice young lady you had dinner with last night in the elevator this morning," she said perkily, her steel-gray curls hanging loosely over her sagging green skin. If Mrs. Willow had a word in the dictionary, it was definitely "naive". "She said she had someplace to go and she couldn't wait up for you, so I took the liberty of asking for her mailing address. I thought you might like to send her a letter or two. She *is* a doll, isn't she?"

Oh, yeah. A nearly nameless, nymphomaniacal one with commitment issues worse than mine. Just who I wanted to be pen pals with.

"Now, I had it written down in here somewhere..." Mrs. Willow shuffled back into her apartment and ducked around behind the door, muttering to herself the whole time. "Over...no.

Not here either. Oh, your poor old mother'd lose her head if it weren't attached to her--ah! Here it is!"

I waited another twenty seconds before I saw Mrs. Willow scoot back into sight, a crumpled piece of notepaper clutched in her teeth. "Now don't you lose that, my little pup," she warned. Yeah, that was her thing. Dogwood was her "little pup". I guess I'd probably have turned into a jerk too with a nickname like that.

I took the paper out of courtesy and gave it a quick glance on its way into my bag. I had a feeling the address probably wasn't going to pan out, considering the city's name was spelled wrong and the zip code had six digits. Plus I was pretty sure I didn't really want to go steady with anypony who lived on "1234 Jerkoff Lane".

"Appreciate it," I said with a grin I've gotten damn good at faking over the last couple years. "But I kinda have to go to work now, so..."

"Well, don't let me hold you up, then," Mrs. Willow crooned. "Have a good day, sweetie!"

A normal, self-respecting stallion would've had the decency to cringe at that point. In my case, it wasn't even close to the worst thing to happen that morning. Perspective is a wonderful thing.

I made it outside without any more interruptions, which left me plenty of time to start thinking about what I was going to do now, with a few seconds left over for me to kick myself over forgetting to mooch a sandwich out of my surrogate mother. Making lists usually helped me get my head screwed on straight, so I decided to try that. First thing: go to the office...actually, scratch that. First thing: get food. Second thing: go to the office. Third thing...

Move out and find a new place before sundown, so I didn't have to deal with thing number four: find a carriage station to sleep under and a box of trash bags to serve as a dresser. Okay, so the list thing wasn't working as well as I'd hoped.

I went outside with my eyes closed, partially because it helped get my mind off my to-do list, but mostly because walking out into the sunshine with a hangover is about the same as tripping face-first into a bed of nails. Luckily, I knew the street well enough that I could make it at least two blocks without looking up at it once. Unluckily, my brain decided to use that time to start considering life options, none of which involved supermodels or a mansion in Canterlot. Or three square meals a day, come to think of it.

I don't really remember when my outlook on life got so negative. I'm lying, of course; I know perfectly well when it happened, but it's nice to be able to say otherwise to ponies so they don't keep asking questions about why I'm so down in the dumps all the time. It never occurs to them that I probably have some pretty good stuff to be down in the dumps about. Like, oh, I don't know, being evicted. That probably qualifies. So does living alone, and making crap money, and being the only pony on the street who not only knows what "writ of certiorari" means

but can actually spell it too. Y'know, stuff like that.

I guess I shouldn't focus so much on just the bad stuff. I guess I should probably learn to laugh at myself and be a free spirit in a locked-off world. I guess I should probably quit drinking whenever I get pissed off and be nicer to my friends and learn how to channel magic through my nosehairs. But hey, nopony's perfect. And me? I'm the freaking Sultan of Screwups. And sometimes, the best I can do is just learn to live with it.

I opened my eyes right before I hit the intersection at the end of the block, just in time to see everypony within twenty feet staring at me like my head had fallen off. At first, I figured it was just a little strange to see a young, prime-of-his-life earth pony walking down a crowded sidewalk with his eyes squeezed shut. When the staring didn't let up after another two blocks, I figured I was probably full of shit.

I passed by a shop window stuffed with clothing in the "if you have to ask, don't even think about it" price range, and gave a sideways glance at my reflection as casually as I could. I didn't see anything, but the lime-green earth mare coming out of the store sure did, judging from the way her face crumpled into a ball as she skirted quickly around me. I took another longer look, and felt a shudder run down my back.

With the whole world watching, I lifted a forehoof up behind my neck, right where a shawl might've gone. When I brought it back down, it was sticky and yellow, and smelled like death warmed over. The mare from the store let out a petite little cough and practically sprinted away.

"Limburger," I said to myself. And then I sighed. It was definitely going to be one of those days.

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