

A/N: Hey, lookit that. A chapter that's actually done in a reasonable amount of time! Go cooler!

## Chapter 16

"Why can't ya'll open it?" Big Mac asked, puzzled.

Blueblood huffed in frustration as he gestured to the enormous, cast-iron door. "The Danger Field is designed to lock down once the simulation goes over a certain danger threshold. The only way to shut it down is in the control room." His frown deepened. "Though the security measures shouldn't kick in unless..." He looked at Big Mac, a worried expression on his face. "I think we should hurry."

Big Mac, Spitfire, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie all followed Blueblood as he hurriedly led the way up a small flight of stairs and down a hall. They burst into the control room, only to see that the window that normally opened into the Danger Field was covered by a metal shutter. Blueblood's eyes widened. "Oh, this is not good..." He hurried to one of the control consoles, his horn lighting up to manipulate the controls.

Spitfire hovered nearby him worriedly. "What's wrong? Is Caramel okay?"

"I'm not certain," Blueblood said distractedly. "However, the control room's protective shutter shouldn't be down unless one of the truly dangerous simulations are active. There are some scenarios I designed to push even Thor to his absolute limit, and Caramel would be hard-pressed to keep up even with his powers... Oh no." His eyes went wide. "He's running Scenario P-22."

"What!?" Pinkie gasped, popping up at Blueblood's side without appearing to traverse the intervening space. "But nopony was supposed to actually *use* those! They were just a quick one-off gag that were never going to be mentioned again!"

"Ah hate t'ask, but... what's scenario P-22?" Big Mac asked.

Blueblood opened his mouth, but Pinkie covered it with a hoof. "No, don't!" she gasped. "I'm only allowed to break the fourth wall so many times, and I already pushed it earlier! Let's just say it's really really dangerous, okay?"

"Then shut it down!" Spitfire commanded, agitatedly. "If Caramel gets hurt..."

"Already on it," Blueblood said, pushing Pinkie away telekinetically. "Aaaand... there. Scenario disabled. Deactivating security measures... now." The metal shutter retracted, revealing the empty Danger Field.

Empty, that is, save for a limp, unmoving, light-brown pony in the very center.

“Caramel!” Spitfire was already out of the room, rocketing down the hall and into the Danger Field. “Caramel, you idiot... what did you do...?” She landed next to him, quickly checking his vitals. “He’s alive, but unconscious,” she informed the others as they followed her into the Field. “He looks pretty beat up...” She turned quickly as Caramel groaned, slowly coming to. “Caramel?”

“S-Spitfire...?” Caramel said weakly, struggling to his hooves. “No... you... you can’t be here. I-I don’t want you to see me like this...”

“What on Equestria were you trying to do, you foolish stallion?” Blueblood asked, looking quite beside himself as he approached. “That scenario was too dangerous for anypony, let alone a pony without powers.”

“Shut up!” Caramel shouted suddenly, startling everypony. “Don’t you dare pity me!” He was breathing heavily and swaying on his hooves, but his eyes burned like coals. “I... I can take it. I have to. I... I don’t need my powers. I don’t. I’m strong... I’m powerful... I’m not a failure...”

“Easy there, Caramel.” Big Mac said, coming up beside him and propping him up. “Ya’ll don’t need to prove anything to us. We’re yer friends.”

“I... just...” Caramel shook his head, as if trying to clear it. “Being Captain Equestria is the first thing that’s ever gone right for me... I don’t want to lose it. Powers or no powers... I can’t go back to the way I was.” He turned to look at Big Mac. “You remember what I was like. I messed up everything I tried. I couldn’t do anything right...”

“Now, that ain’t true,” Big Mac tried to argue. “Ya’ll were a hard worker, and ya gave yer all ta everthin’ you did. That counts fer a lot.”

“No it doesn’t, and you know it!” Caramel protested, pushing the larger pony away. “What about last year’s Winter Wrap Up, when I lost the seeds FOUR times? We all know you were just hiring me to be nice; everypony did. I don’t ever want to have to rely on anypony ever again.”

WHACK! Caramel fell to the ground, blinking in surprise from the hoofslap. Spitfire hovered over him angrily, glaring down at him. “You idiot!” she seethed. “We’re your friends! You’re *supposed* to rely on us. That’s what friends are for!” Caramel tried to interject, but Spitfire wouldn’t let him, poking a hoof into his chest. “You don’t need to prove how strong you are to us, Caramel. We *know* how strong you are. It has nothing to do with your powers, your muscles, or anything physical.” The hoof on his chest poked him again, but much gentler, pointing at where his heart was. “*This* is where you’re strong. In here. You never give up, and that takes more strength than fighting a hundred mutants.” She hovered a little lower, her face nearing his. “But stunts like this? This isn’t strength, Caramel. This is being *weak*. Don’t ever do it again, okay?”

"I..." Caramel blinked back tears, and smiled. "I won't. I promise."

"Good," she said with a satisfied grin. Without warning, she suddenly dropped onto him and kissed him. Caramel blinked in surprise, stiffing in shock for a few moments before relaxing, wrapping his hooves around her and kissing her back.

A bright golden glow enveloped the pair as they kissed, radiating out from Spitfire only to be drawn into Caramel, making his body glow like the rising sun. As he lay there, his hooves around the mare of his dreams, he felt his muscles grow, and his body expand. Power rushed into him like water into a well.

Captain Equestria was reborn.

Rarity dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. "Oh, that's so beautiful!" she gushed. "I must say, Mr. Macintosh, you have an excellent sense of timing."

Big Macintosh was grinning proudly. "S'not me," he confided. "Ah need to touch th' other pony t'make it work."

"What?" Rarity's brow furrowed. "Then how...?"

"Some things're even stronger'n friendship," Big Mac said simply, his grin growing. "Way t'go, little buddy," He whispered.

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"We don't have long," Big Mac told the group. They were all assembled in the meeting room. With the exception of Big Mac and the 'civilians', they were all in costume and ready for battle. "Loki said th' Princesses are alive fer now, but there's no way'a knowing how long that'll last." He paced back and forth nervously. "We need a way t' take out th' Dark Avengers, Trixie, and Loki with just the th' four of us." He sighed. "An' Ah dunno how much use Ah'll be inna fight without Thor. Ah'm mighty strong, but Ah dun think Ah'm much of a match. Anypony got any ideas?"

The room was silent. Everypony looked anxious and uncomfortable, save Blueblood, with his expression hidden behind his helmet. Even Pinkie Pie looked concerned.

Finally, Caramel spoke up. "I've... been thinking about the Dark Avengers," he volunteered. "I think I might have a way to beat them. I think Loki might've done *too* good a job on them; there's some weaknesses I think we can exploit."

"Good," Big Mac said with a relieved smile and a nod. "Now what about Trixie? Next

t'Loki, she's the biggest threat, what with her havin' Gungnir."

"Oh, you don't need to worry about her!" reassured a cheerful voice. Everypony looked on in shock as a tiny filly Princess Celestia leapt out from under the table. "Trixie's gone, she won't be bothering anypony!"

"P-Princess!" Big Mac stuttered, his posture straightening. "Ah thought Loki captured you. How'd you escape?"

The tiny Princess chuckled. "Everypony seems to have forgotten that just because I *look* like a filly, doesn't make me any less the millennia-old trickster goddess that I've always been. They didn't even bother with binding me away like they did my sister; they just put me a anti-magic cell like we use for unicorn criminals." She shook her head in mock disappointment. "You think they'd know better than to let the tiny goddess out of her cell for a potty break."

"Princess," Spitfire interrupted politely. "What did you mean when you said Trixie was gone?"

"Oh! Right!" Celestia said, leaping up onto the table and turning to address everypony. "No pony ever bothers to hide things from a little filly, so I was able to find out all sorts of useful things! Like, for example, how Trixie turned on Loki to try and take Equestria for herself. Loki dealt with her easily, of course. She got away, but I don't think she'll be coming back for a while and she took Gungnir with her, so we don't have to worry about it!"

Big Mac grinned broadly at the news. "That's perfect! Wit' Trixie gone, if you three c'n handle the Dark Avengers than that just leaves Loki..." His face fell suddenly. "For me. Aw, who'm Ah kiddin'?"

Pinkie bounced to her friend's side. "Don't worry, Mac-Attack! I'm sure you'll think of something!"

Big Mac forced a smile. "Thanks, Pinkie, but Ah dunno. We don't really have anypony as strong as Loki. Unless... Princess?"

Everypony turned to look at the shrunken monarch. She shuffled her hooves embarrassedly. "Ummm... sorry. I still don't have most of my power yet. I'd say I'm about as strong as a really strong unicorn right now, and that's not enough to take on a really powerful Alicorn like Loki." Her face lit up. "Oh! But I have an idea!" She leapt off the table and onto Big Mac's back. "I think I have a way for *you* to do it!" She leaned down and whispered in his ear. Big Mac listened patiently, and a grin slowly crept across his face.

When Celestia was finished, Big Mac turned to the Avengers. "Listen up, everypony!" he commanded. His voice was still unmistakably his, but it shook with the confidence and godlike

tones of Thor. "Ah think we've got ourselves a plan!"

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The group nervously approached Canterlot Castle, taking the side roads to avoid being spotted. The streets were crawling with unusually large earth ponies, easily the size of Big Mac or Caramel, all wearing heavy armor and bearing the mark of Loki over where their Cutie Marks should be.

"Those are Loki's constructs," Celestia informed them in a whisper as they snuck along. "The ones out here mostly belong to that big armored unicorn, the Iron Monger. Loki gave them to him and he controls them from his room in the Castle. But once you're inside, all the constructs will be controlled directly by Loki, and anything they see, he'll see too. You'll have to be careful."

"I have to admit, I don't like this plan," Spitfire said with a frown. She turned to Big Mac. "An awful lot seems to rest on Loki behaving like you think he will, and it puts you in a lot of danger. You're not invincible anymore, you know."

"Spitfire - er, Firebird is quite right," Blueblood - now Iron Pony again - said, his voice distorted by his armor. "Are you quite certain about this, Macintosh?"

"Don't worry!" Pinkie Pie said cheerfully. "Big Mac can handle anything Loki dishes out, right Mac?"

Big Mac chuckled. "Eeeyup. Don't y'all worry none. This'll work, Ah promise."

"We're here!" Celestia announced. The group came to a stop in front of what seemed to be a dead end alley. Boxes and garbage were piled high, and at Celestia's direction, Big Mac and Captain Equestria pushed a large pile to the side, revealing a hidden door. "This'll get you into the castle," the diminutive Princess chirped. "You have everything you need?"

Big Mac placed a hoof on the small pouch Rarity had cunningly sewn, almost completely hidden against his bright red coat. "Eeeeyup. Everypony remember their jobs?" He glanced around as everypony nodded seriously, even Pinkie Pie. "Good. Rarity, ya'll better take th' Princess back to th' mansion, where it's safe."

"Of course," Rarity said. She trotted up to Iron Pony and briefly whispered in his ear. Blueblood flipped up his faceplate in response, and gave her a brief kiss.

"I'll be fine, dearest Rarity. I promise," he whispered, before flipping his faceplate back down. "Now go, and hurry. We'll see you soon." Rarity nodded and hurriedly collected the Princess, fleeing the alleyway before anypony could see her crying.

“Bye everypony!” Celestia called as Rarity dragged her away. “Good luck!”

Big Mac smiled briefly, before turning back to the door. “Whelp. Here goes nothin’.” He nudged the door open. “Let’s do this, everypony.”

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Loki stood in his new throne room, smiling to himself. The grand throne room had been redesigned, the bright colors exchanged with Loki’s green and yellow. The stained-glass windows had been changed from the beautiful murals depicting the history of Equestria to endless repetitions of Loki’s own visage, and his twisted snake symbol.

The doors to the grand chamber swung open, and a small troop of armored constructs marched in, a beaten-up Big Mac being dragged along in their midst. Loki turned to meet the procession, his smile growing wider. “Ah, if it isn’t my brother’s former host.” He chuckled, practically hopping down from the raised dais the throne sat on. “Come to save the day with a dashing display of last-minute heroics, have you? Did you really think I wouldn’t be watching the secret entrances to the castle? I happen to be quite clever; that sort of thing doesn’t get past me.” Loki was quite proud of his speech; he’d adapted from his ancient Asgardian speech patterns to a much more modern mode, allowing him to sound less like an antiquated villain from an old novel and more like a modern, up-to-date ruler.

Big Mac, however, showed little respect for Loki’s achievement. He said nothing, not even lifting his head. He just stared at the ground, not even daring to look upon Loki’s magnificence, which was just fine with Loki. “Really, what did you even hope to accomplish? You’re nothing but a mortal earth pony who used to host my brother’s soul. Did you really think you stood a chance against me?”

“Not really,” Big Mac said, sounding oddly jovial. Loki’s brow furrowed as the red earth pony raised his head to reveal a large, ear-to-ear grin. “But mah job wasn’t t’fight ya. Ah was just tryin’ to get close enough to use this!” He pulled a small gemstone Rarity had prepared from the hidden pouch she’d sown for him, tossing it at Loki as hard as he could.

Loki acted without even thinking. He aimed Mjolnir at the gem and fired a bolt of lightning. The bolt was so bright as to blind everypony in the room, and Loki felt a powerful wave of magic expanding from the gem. When his vision cleared, Big Macintosh stood by himself, smirking at him from the center of the throne room.

The constructs were all gone.

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The Avengers stood just outside Canterlot Castle, hidden in a handy bush. Iron Pony, Firebird, and Captain Equestria all sat in silence, quietly awaiting the signal.

Suddenly, Iron Pony leapt to his feet. "There it is!" he exclaimed. "I just felt it; Rarity's gem bomb just went off. Come on!" He lead the charge into the castle, the gates now left unguarded.

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"What... what did you do?" Loki asked, his friendly demeanor vanishing under his anger. "Where did my guards go?"

Big Mac just chuckled at his foe's distress. "Ya'll c'n thank Rarity's anti-magic gem bomb fer that. It's not all that strong, an' it only lasts for a second. On top of that, it needs a sample of magic from th' pony it's canceling out. Lucky fer us, it's just strong 'nuff to cancel out all them guards'a yers, and ya'll were kind enough to provide the magic sample." He began approaching Loki. "It'll take ya'll hours to call up more guards, 'n by then it'll be too late. Mah friends'r takin' care'a yer Dark Avengers, and Ah'll take care'a you. Yer finished, Loki."

Loki blinked, staring at the arrogant earth pony. Than he chuckled, which grew into a deep, resounding laugh. "Oh, that's just too funny! You think a weak little mortal like you can defeat a god? Even without my guards, even assuming your puny friends can defeat my Dark Avengers, there is no possible way for a weakling like you to defeat me. You're just an earth pony!"

"Mah friends're strong than ya'll think, Loki," Big Mac said calmly. "And, fer all yer talk about how alicorns shouldn't underestimate unicorns, ya'll sure are underestimating us earth ponies an awful lot."

Loki snorted impatiently. "Oh please. Like you could possibly... wait." His brow furrowed as he noticed something amiss in Mac's phrasing. "Did you say 'us earth ponies'?"

"Eeeeeyup," Big Mac said with a grin. "Pinkie! NOW!"

"Okie dokie!" came a familiar voice from behind Loki, just as he felt a weight land on his back. "Hiya, grandpa Loki!" A pink blur shot down his leg and yanked Mjolnir off. The cords of the ancient hammer offered little resistance as Pinkie Pie separated it from its surrogate wielder. "Bye grandpa Loki!" Pinkie set off at a run towards Big Mac, hammer in her mouth.

Loki had to stop and take a moment to process what had just happened, but when he did, he flared his wings and roared in anger, his voice shaking loose stones from the ceiling. "**HOW DARE YOU!**" he boomed, his horn lighting up. "**YOU DARE DEFY LOKI? I WILL WIPE YOU FROM THE FACE OF EQUESTRIA, YOU ARROGANT PEST!**" A bolt of magic leapt from

his horn, forming into a snake as it lashed at Pinkie.

At the last second, Pinkie felt her tail twitch and leapt to the side, causing the bolt to splash harmlessly on the stone floor. She swung her head, tossing the hammer to Big Mac as she ran past. “Tag, you’re it! Bye!” She was already dashing out the door as Big Mac held out his hoof to receive his hammer.

**“NOOOOOOOOOOO!”** Loki screamed, but it was too late.

Mjolnir’s cords wrapped themselves around Big Mac’s hoof, snuggling the hammer against him like a foal glad to return home. There was a brief pause, before Mjolnir began to glow brightly, covering its wielder in its radiance. The glow grew brighter and brighter, blinding Loki. Finally, an earsplitting thunderclap could be heard, and the glow ceased. Fearfully, Loki looked back at where Big Mac once stood.

**“LOKI!”** boomed the reborn God of Thunder. **“I WOULD  
HAVE WORDS WITH THEE.”**

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A/N: Don’t forget to leave comments! They make me happy inside!