

## Chapter 36

Trigger Mark chewed on his mouthful of oats, balancing the bowl with the rest of them in his lap as he sat on the bench outside the camp. “So... you’re quitting.” He said.

“Right,” said Gunner, nodding. “I’m heading over to the library after breakfast.”

“Have you told the general?” asked Trigger Mark.

“Iiiiiiiiiiiiiii...” said Gunner, holding up a hoof while his smile stayed unsettlingly unchanging.

“You didn’t.”

“Yeah, no.”

“Well, good luck finding out how to tell Quake that you quit without getting your face smashed in,” said Trigger Mark, scarfing down the last of his oats.

“Maybe he just won’t care,” said Gunner. “Maybe I can just not show up, orrrrrr...”

“Or what?”

Gunner smiled. “Maybe you can cover for me?”

Trigger Mark stiffened and looked blankly at him. “This is getting ridiculous.”

“What?”

“It’s like everyone with this Fraternity expects me to do a favor... I cover for you, I tell Scroll I’ll vouch for his idea, I help White get away...”

“Actually, with White, that was all you,” said Gunner. “He didn’t really... *ask* to get bailed out.”

“Oh, shut up,” he grumbled into his empty bowl. “He might as well have asked.”

“Well, whatever,” said Gunner, downing the last of his oats and getting up. “Anyway, can I count on you to not report me?”

“Sure...” said Trigger Mark.

“Thanks, Mark,” said Gunner as he walked over to Trigger Mark’s side, giving him a hearty pat on the shoulder. “You’re a total bro.”

Trigger Mark watched as Gunner cheerfully marched off, wondering if there wasn’t something he should be doing about it.

*No, Trigger Mark thought to himself. I think I’ve had enough of worrying about other ponies for today.*

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Aq left the hospital without incident. Despite his annoying temperament, White seemed to know how to handle a jaw.

Princess escorted him down the hall. “You know, I think after that time in there, some sunlight will do you some good.”

Aq, whose muzzle was still tied up to let the jaw heal, could not speak on the subject, but simply nodded his head and hummed dully.

“Right this way,” said Princess, guiding him up a flight of stairs. Aq found himself more cautious in his ascent, likely for fear that he might slip and shatter his jaw all over again.

*That missionary has turned me into a wreck,* he thought.

After long, slow guidance up the stairs, they emerged from the grey interiors of the Fortress and onto the ramparts above. Princess merrily walked over to the edge and looked out at the expanse of sky.

“Well, if that isn’t something,” she said, pointing to a stray cloud. “I wonder where that came from? Perhaps a lost cloud that some pegasi left behind?” She paused, musing on it.

Aq couldn’t see it at first, as he had to shield his eyes when they first emerged. After his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw it; a thin wispy trail of vapor. Perhaps General Storm had been here before. By the looks of it they were long gone. There had been very few times they had actually fought the pegasi. Not with the regularity that they fought the earth ponies.

“It’s a lovely day,” said Princess, looking back at him. “It’s a good thing you got out of the hospital early today. It means you have the rest of the day to enjoy.”

Aq walked to the edge and looked down at the walkways below. He saw the edge of it had broken off long ago, courtesy of one of General Quake's cannonballs. He remembered the recent episode where an idiot observer had fallen onto the island when a tower had been blown off. It was a miracle he managed to get back, having had a teleporter on him at the time. White had saved him, apparently.

*Everything is going to remind me of him, isn't it?* Aq wondered.

"Something on your mind?" asked Princess.

Aq shook his head.

"I think we should get you a pen and a pad of paper," said Princess thoughtfully. "This conversation is completely one-sided."

Aq shrugged. Thinking on it, he found he didn't have a whole lot to say. At the moment he just wanted to stew with his thoughts in the sunlight.

"Yes, that's what I think I'll do," said Princess, before leaning on the crenellations. She hummed. "Isn't it a lovely day?" she asked. "I think the other unicorns spend too much time inside. When I'm in charge I think I'll expand. More walkways, more outdoor areas. But by then, we might not need much else on the Fortress. We'll have our own land, won't we?"

Aq nodded. He walked next to her, looking out at the sea and the sky.

*"And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by..."* sang a voice.

*Oh no...* thought Aq.

*"And the wheels kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking. And a grey mist on the sea's face... and a grey dawn breaking..."*

"White has such a lovely tenor voice," mused Princess.

Aq groaned. He was going to get back at White, somehow. Maybe he'd get another chance to drop the little pink brat off of a ledge again. Or maybe he'd just beat White up. Or something. His head was still addled.

“I think I’ll get you a board and a marker,” said Princess. “I’m sure the scientists have some lying around.”

Aq felt his eye twitch, thinking about the... scientists. He didn’t dislike them or their inventions, but there were things about them that made him uncomfortable. A sort of attitude of *I’m fine with you, but I’ll stay away*. He sat down, nodding grimly.

He followed Princess as they walked back inside. He was partially glad to be back on his hooves... but he had the feeling there would be a great deal of indignity in his condition.

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Scroll looked down at the device before him. The unicorn technology was a pain to try to work with. It had no moving parts or much of anything to work with. Obviously it was magic, and could seemingly only be activated through magic. As an earth pony, his magic options were limited.

*But I’ve read about magic mechanics, thought Scroll, and I did a potato battery in school.*

He prodded the wire, and the device seemed to glow for a second. Scroll smiled. Finally, some success.

“What is that?” asked Eagle, peering over his shoulder.

“Something the unicorns use to go from their castle to here,” Scroll explained. “I was thinking, maybe if I can get it to work I can use it to get there.”

“Okay...” said Eagle. He looked quizzically at the device, then at Scroll. “And... why would you do that?”

“To find White,” said Scroll. “Maybe other earth ponies, too; they’ve been taking prisoners.”

“And... how do you keep yourself from, y’know... dying?”

“Well!...” Scroll began, but faltered. That had been the part of the plan he hadn’t thought through. Though in all honesty, there was very little of the plan he’d actually thought through. He just wanted to see White again.

“Well, whatever,” said Eagle. “Whatever you do, just do it after I’m in the clear, okay?”

“Yeah,” said Scroll, ruffling through some of the papers on his desk. “Don’t worry, I’m on that.” He grabbed a sheet of paper and put it on top of the pile. “Got the letter asking about the diversity kit. Just gotta take that over to Quake and get it approved.” He held it up to Eagle’s face.

“...Okay,” said Eagle, staring blankly at the letter. “Uh, great. Hope it all works out. I’m uh... kind of depending on it.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Who is it?” Scroll asked.

“Me, duh,” said Tap’s voice, before she opened it and knocked wryly again. “So how goes it?” she asked. She looked at the mess on Scroll’s desk. “So, is your magic science project working out okay?”

“He got it to glow,” said Eagle.

“Ah,” said Tap. “So you’re that much closer to getting yourself shot.”

“It’s a work in progress,” said Scroll drolly. As though a little embarrassed, he started shuffling the mess of wires and papers into the desk drawers. “Anyway, I’m gonna visit Quake and hope he doesn’t smash my face in.”

“Hey, I’m there for backup, aren’t I?” asked Tap. “Relax, it’s your usual letter back. Just as long as he doesn’t think you’re writing in code and slipping something he doesn’t want out.”

“Well, I’ve slipped through like three letters with lemon juice on them,” said Scroll. He paused. “I don’t think anyone found them.”

“That’s why I never took up gambling,” said Tap.

“Helloooo!” called another voice from outside. It was Gunner’s.

“Well, *his* mood took a turn,” muttered Tap as Gunner walked in.

“So, what are we doing today?” he asked, looking around the room, before his eyes fell on Scroll’s desk. “Oh, hey, is that some kind of magic science project?”

“You know, I like you,” said Tap, giving a smirk.

Gunner grinned in a self-satisfied and slightly cheeky way. “Well, I try.”

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Quake looked at the letter. Scroll watched his eyes as they went from top to bottom to top again. “Hmpf,” he muttered. “Looks fine, unless you pieces of shit are talking in code.”

Scroll sighed inwardly in relief. However, he saw Quake’s eyes narrow. “The fuck is a diversity kit?”

“Well, uh...” muttered Scroll. “It’s something that we thought the Fraternity could use with our mission, uh...” He looked at Quake. Quake was wearing his grumpiest ‘not putting up with your shit’ face today, and it was starting to take on shades of ‘stop stammering, faggot.’ “It’s for teaching about the different kinds of ponies, you see...” His eyes flicked over to Trigger Mark, who cleared his throat.

“General, if I may speak...” said Trigger Mark.

“What,” grunted Quake.

“Well, if it’s used to teach about... wingers or horners, it may have some use,” explained Trigger Mark. “For practical purposes.”

Quake looked at him as though that were the dumbest thing he’d heard in his life. “Practical fucking purposes?” he asked. “Do I *look* like I have trouble killing them?” He looked around. “Hey!” he shouted to the soldiers assembled. “Anyone here need some help killing wingers? Or horners?”

The other soldiers laughed. He crossed a line out of the letter and threw the paper back at Scroll. “Give me something I can use. Be fucking useful.”

Scroll frantically and quietly grabbed the paper and stumbled out of the tent, biting his lip as he left the camp. “Well, fuck...” he muttered to himself, before looking at Tap, who was walking beside him. “What do I do?”

“You know, you and White left a lot of stuff in my house after I kicked you out,” said Tap, following along beside him. “I’ve still got some stuff in the old mission room.”

Scroll slowed. “There might be one in there...” His face lit up and he took off down the road.

“I’m a huge idiot!” he said as he burst through the door. A confused patron looked up at the bizarre announcement as Scroll tore into the old mission room. “That would’ve been the first thing Sky and Shine would have tried. If there were any left...”

He tore through the cabinets, going through pots, pans, boxes, and the other things stored. Tap entered the room and leaned against the doorway. “You’re gonna clean up after yourself, right?”

“Puzzle, joke book...” said Scroll, ruffling through the items. “*YES! YES! YES!*” he shouted.

“You found one?” asked Tap, rushing up behind him.

Scroll leaned back, holding a book in his hooves. “I’ve been looking for this for weeks! I thought I’d lost it!”

“But what about the kit?” asked Tap.

“The kit?”

“The diversity kit.”

“The diversity kit! Shit!” said Scroll, throwing himself back into the cupboard.

Tap watched as he ruffled about, his rear shaking behind him. Then something made him jump, and there was a loud thumping sound. “You hit your head?” she asked.

“Yeah... ow... but it’s okay!” shouted Scroll, pulling himself out of the cupboard. He sat down leaning against the cupboard door, one hoof rubbing the back of his head and the other clutching a box next to him. “I found it. We had one all along!”

“Convenient,” said Tap, raising an eyebrow.

Scroll brought it to a nearby table and started to open the box. “Yes, yes, yes,” he said happily to himself as he began sorting the contents. “Got everything... book of simple magic tricks, seed-planting kid... cloud-making... oh. Oh no.”

“What is it?” asked Tap, walking up next to him and looking at a small device that Scroll had produced. Scroll’s eye was twitching, his face frozen in a pained expression.

“Batteries not included...”

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Back at the library, Scroll looked despondently at the apparently useless device in front of him. Gunner stepped up behind him and looked over his shoulder.

“Hey, it’s not so bad,” said Gunner, giving him an encouraging prod. “Just needs some batteries and it’ll be fine.”

Gunner and Barrel huddled around his desk, looking at the mess of stuff. There wasn’t much else in the Diversity Kit that would be useful. Like Scroll had said, it was mostly just stuff that missionaries showed to tribes of singular pony types, for education about broader ponykind.

“I guess...” said Scroll. He sighed. “But then Quake’s going to ask what he can do with a battery...” He lowered his head. “I guess I could try to make one... I mean, I remember doing projects in school where we made simple batteries, but...”

“Then you got nothing to worry about,” said Gunner.

“But...”

“Scroll?” asked Barrel. “I think you’re working too hard. You’ve done a lot.”

Scroll looked around the unimpressive library, then at the pegasus in the box. “But I...”

“Barrel’s right,” said Gunner. “I think you’re gonna wear yourself out.”

“You found the stuff,” said Barrel. “You can make a battery. Tomorrow.”

“To...”

“I think you should take a break,” said Barrel. He smiled, looking at Eagle. “I think we could all use a little less stress. I’ve got something...” He reached into his bag, shuffling around for a moment before removing four potatoes and placing them on the desk.

“What it is?” asked Eagle.

“Potatoes?” asked Scroll.

“Uh-huh!” said Barrel.

“I don’t like potatoes...” said Eagle.

Barrel turned around, open-mouthed. “What?”

“I’ve eaten plenty of potatoes,” grumbled Eagle, slinking in his chest. “They’re bland as hell.”

“But there are so many ways you can do them!” Barrel said, his voice rising in excitement and just a little indignation. “You can boil them, bake them, fry them...”

“Huh?” asked Eagle, his face taking on an expression of such intense confusion that it warped over to annoyance.

“I’m thinking we make baked potatoes...” Barrel said, his face taking on a dreamy expression as his mind floated off to thoughts of simple fried foods.

“Wait,” said Gunner, looking at Eagle. “You’ve... never had a baked potato?”

“Uhh...” Eagle shook his head. “Nooo?”

“A baked potato sounds nice,” said Scroll quietly.

“Then it’s settled!” said Barrel, putting one hoof on Scroll’s shoulder and another on Gunner’s shoulder. “You’ll come to the tavern tonight and we’ll all have baked potatoes.”

Gunner smiled. “That sounds...”

“Uhh, hello?” asked Eagle. “That sounds fun and all, but I’ve got these things called ‘wings’ and they’re kinda not popular on this island-”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” said Barrel, uncharacteristically quick in his response. “I’ve got it taken care of.”

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Carpenter’s ears were ringing. The roaring sounds of factory machinery around him were deafening. He stood at the conveyer belt, pulling a lever at a dull rhythm. What the lever did, he didn’t know and he didn’t give a shit.

*Screeeeee! Klllllkt! Screeeeee! Klllllkt! Screeeeee! Klllllkt! Screeeeee! Klllllkt!*

It was like that time Buzz decided he'd do 'experimental' percussion music. Thank fuck that had only lasted a week. That had been the second-worst week of Carpenter's life. He missed having real work to do with wood. Something he could get his hooves on, take pride in. Well, there was one way out. Bits of wood smuggled through the ranks. Whispers and rumors. One might worry about a snitch, but none of these earth ponies had any love for their captors.

He looked up and saw one of them walking through, inspecting them. Aq, fresh out of his stay in the hospital. Carpenter found himself wishing White hadn't decided to be nice again. Still, it was a little satisfying to see him, the bandages around his head keeping that smug grin off of his face, and a particularly amusing new addition: a whiteboard dangling around his neck.

"Hey, how's the recovery?" Carpenter asked snidely.

Aq gave him a look. It was probably supposed to be surely, but he couldn't express much with the wrapping around his head. Just an annoyed glint in his eye. His horn lit up and his whiteboard floated in front of him. A felt-tip pen floated out of a pocket in his uniform, uncapped itself, and began to write.

*'FUCK YOU.'*

Carpenter smirked and pulled the lever.

He didn't know how long it lasted. Hours, definitely. But there were no clocks, no windows to check the sun... How long had it been since he'd seen the sun instead of one of these lamps? Or the moon or the stars? Or felt the wind? Or seen his son...

The high scream of the whistle signaled a break. A new set of earth ponies filed in to take over, and guards (Aq included) shoved them off the stations, herding them into the halls back to their quarters like so much chattel.

It was a nightmare that seemed like it would never end. Not only was it a nightmare; it was an *annoying* nightmare, perhaps the worst kind of nightmare to have. His thoughts wandered back home. In retrospect, life there was shitty, but at least it was the kind of shitty life where you had some semblance of control over it. He thought about Buzz. He thought about Brother White with a faggy grin on his face. He thought about General Quake shaking the earth and kicking ass. Food that wasn't grown in a lab. Or rejected from said lab.

The living quarters provided some limited respite. The guards seemed not to poke their noses in it (perhaps they were afraid of some kind of earth pony smell). And that made things convenient.

He dug under his cot, looking at the materials. A few large planks of wood, some rope, and a watertight adhesive. Not enough to put much of anything together, sadly. He looked to the others. They had similar stocks. Bit by bit, they had managed to smuggle some from their workstations.

He and the other earth ponies gathered around, speaking in hushed voices.

“I don’t know what else we can get,” said one of them. “Or where we’re supposed to put the damn thing together.”

“Or get it out,” said another. “What, do we... just shove it out and then jump?”

“How high up is this damn thing?” asked another.

“Hey, a high dive might be fun. At least if it kills us it’s a hell of a better way to go out than what we’ve got.”

“None of that matters if we can’t get the damn thing built in the first place,” said another. “We need help.”

“From...”

“From one of the fucking corners, dipshit.”

Someone got a hit in the head. Carpenter wasn’t sure. What he was sure was that everyone was looking at him expectantly.

“What are you all looking at me for?” he asked.

“You know the Equestrian better than the rest of us,” said another, shrugging. “You ask him.”

Carpenter sighed. “Fine. I’d rather... *not*, but...”

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So once again, White found Carpenter seated across from him. Before coming to this floating castle, these two had only seen each other on occasions when Carpenter had wanted to murder him or call him a faggot. Strange times breed strange bedfellows, White might have said. However, he realized that Carpenter might take the word ‘bedfellows’ the wrong way, so he didn’t say that.

“So how are things?” White asked, trying his hardest to smile, which was more taxing with the depressing lighting and surly guard.

“Oh, it’s okay,” said Carpenter. Unfortunately, Carpenter did not have White’s extensive musical theatre experience, which left his delivery flat, forced, and altogether unengaging. Even Scroll had been better at it. “But it’s very difficult work.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” said Carpenter. He took a deep, stiff breath. “It’s just, sometimes the things we have to do are so difficult... and so complicated... sometimes it feels like we need help.” He gave a nervous look at the guard. “Well, that’s how it is for *me*, at least. How it feels.”

“Why are you looking at me?” asked the guard.

White regarded Carpenter curiously. The bad acting was a tip-off that he was speaking in code for something. “Well, that’s a very interesting concern,” said White. “I’m listening to it, and I’ll take it into consideration.” With considerable effort, he gave one of his signature winning smiles. “Anything else?”

“The guys told me to ‘say hi to Smiley McScrottyballs,’” said Carpenter with a shrug.

White frowned. “Hi.”

Carpenter got up. “Well, that was about it. Let me know if you get something on that.”

“Right, right...” said White, rubbing his head. He watched as Carpenter was led out of the room. He’d have to start thinking on that, because he didn’t have any ideas.

With no more ponies left to see him, the guard led him out of the room. That was well enough; he could reconvene with Brother Shine and get his thoughts in order. He hoped he could count on him; he seemed sincere, and White wasn’t going to turn his back on someone like that. Especially not when he needed all the help he could get.

His thoughts, however, were rattled when he found himself face-to-face with General Monarch. He looked up. “Hello?”

“Brother White,” said the general, smiling, his voice as oily as ever. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you.”

General Monarch maneuvered himself to White’s side as the two of them walked down the hall. White looked up at him, sensing that nothing good was going to come of this.

“Yes?” White asked.

“I would like to invite you to join me for dinner tonight,” said Monarch. “In private. Do you have time?”

*He’s mocking me,* thought White. *I don’t have anything but time.* They looked each other in the face. Monarch’s gaze was penetrating, magnetic. White thought about saying no. He didn’t think much of Monarch’s intentions; the general was messing with him. Quake, at least, had the decency to directly threaten (and attempt) violence against him. Monarch was so much more insidious.

And yet, White found himself saying “Okay, sure.” He wasn’t completely sure why. He saw a grin spread on Monarch’s face and felt a pit in his stomach.

“Well, then,” said General Monarch. “I look forward to it.”

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“I am not looking forward to this,” muttered Eagle, as he and Scroll walked into town.

“Just keep calm and don’t draw attention to yourself,” said Scroll.

They’d put Eagle in a large, shabby coat to conceal his wings, though that did little to make him less nervous. Why did he agree to this? Nothing better to do, he supposed.

“Here we are,” said Scroll, stopping in front of the door to Tap’s place. “Just sit down, keep quiet, don’t get into any bar fights.”

“Sure, sounds easy,” said Eagle, in a tone that suggested that there were a lot of other things Scroll was forgetting to offer advice on. None the less, he crossed the threshold without protest.

Eagle had to blink inside. There was a fire going in the fireplace, lamps lit around the rooms, and ponies laughing and drinking. He'd been in buildings like this before, probably even in the earlier incarnations of this very establishment, but those had always been during an invasion. So this was what it looked like when it was in use. *Huh.*

He still felt alien, out of place, and nervous, but there was something oddly inviting about the place. He was rustled from his thoughts by a tap on the shoulder. Scroll was pointing him to a table in the corner where Barrel and Gunner were seated. Barrel was smiling and waving at them.

Scroll and Eagle took the invitation, walking over and seating themselves. Eagle made sure that his seat had a back to the wall, so that he could see if anyone approached them. Despite the warm welcome and lack of suspicious looks, he had every reason to be nervous. Actually, it was only one reason, but "they'll murder me on sight" was a good one by any metric.

"Glad you could make it!" said Barrel. "The food will be out shortly."

"Potatoes?" asked Eagle, making a face.

"Just wait," said Barrel, smiling and waving a hoof as though trying to waft away Eagle's doubts.

Scroll, for his part, just took a deep, relieved sigh.

"You alright?" asked Gunner.

"Yeah," said Scroll. "It's just my life has been pretty crazy for... well, my life's been crazy ever since I got off that boat. I find myself wondering why I didn't jump back on as soon as I saw that one, uh..." He stopped, glancing at Eagle. He had been about to mention the pegasus they saw murdered on their first day, but he figured that wouldn't do anything to calm his nerves.

"Well, hey, if it means anything, I think you're doing great," said Gunner.

"White said I would..." said Scroll. "If I'm still alive by the end of the mission it'll be something."

Tap approached their table carrying a large tray on her back. "Alright, boys," she said, sliding it onto the table. It had four potatoes, with four knives and forks and a fairly large tub of butter and two smaller vessels of salt and pepper. "Enjoy your night off, bro. You'll earn it tomorrow."

“Aye-aye, sis,” said Barrel, passing out the potatoes. He hummed happily to himself as he cut his open, steam rising from it. “Mmmm...”

Eagle watched as Scroll and Gunner did the same with theirs, slathering them with butter and salt. “Uhhh...” he said. He slowly started doing the same thing. “So you don’t just... eat potatoes?” he asked. “You do all this stuff?”

“There are so many things you can do with potatoes,” said Barrel. “You can bake them, boil them, cut them into fries or chips, you can make booze with them...”

“You can make booze with anything, can’t you?” said Scroll.

“Pretty much!” said Barrel.

Eagle dipped his fork into the potato, lifted it, and put it to his mouth. The warmth, the flavor of butter and salt, the simple wholesomeness of the meal... was difficult to notice when it was as hot as it was.

“Hot! Hot!” he yelped, before grabbing a tankard of ale and downing it. “Ughh...”

“Blow on it first?” suggested Barrel.

“They stay hot,” explained Scroll. “See, potatoes have a lot of water in them, so they, uh...” He stopped himself. “Well, you get the idea.”

Eagle took a deep breath and left his potato cool for a little, before taking another bite. “Hmm,” he said, chewing. “This isn’t bad...”

“Toldja,” said Barrel.

“Never had a baked potato?” asked Gunner.

“Never really had baked anything,” said Eagle. “We take the food and we eat it and, well...”

“Oh,” said Barrel, blinking. “That sounds boring. I’m sorry.”

Eagle took another bite. “So you di...” He stopped and looked around, checking there were no eavesdroppers, before continuing with a more hushed voice. “You ponies can do other things with your food?”

“Welcome to the wonderful world of cooking,” said Scroll, helping himself. “Mm... A wonderful, wonderful world.”

“Brother Scroll makes really good apple pies,” said Barrel. “And Tap can make all kinds of things.”

“I can boil water without setting it on fire,” offered Gunner.

All of them laughed, even though the joke was lame. For once in a long time, Eagle felt... pretty good. It was true that the danger wasn't gone, but he could forget about it for a while. He looked at Scroll, then at Barrel, then at Gunner. These were good ponies. He could be friends with them. He looked down at the potato and took another bite.

“Scroll, I thought you were... the absolute lowest for not wanting to fight,” said Eagle. “But choosing between war and these potatoes... I can see why you'd pick the potatoes. Heh...” He leaned back. “Makes me think... there's a pony stuck in a room. He likes it in his room, but he hears a whole bunch of noise outside. Makes it sound like there's a lot of things going on outside that he's missing out on, but he doesn't...”

He looked up, however, and then that good feeling became a little more muted. He saw Trigger Mark approaching the table, wearing a very dark scowl indeed.

All four of them noticed before long, and turned to look.

“Hi,” said Gunner, holding a hoof up.

“Scroll, could you step outside with me for a minute?” asked Trigger Mark.

Eagle, Gunner, and Barrel all exchanged glances, but Scroll just looked straight at him. “Alright, sure,” he said, getting up. The other three watched as Scroll and Trigger Mark silently exited the tavern.

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“Are you insane?” asked Trigger Mark.

“Not so loud,” said Scroll, leading them into the alley behind the tavern. “And no, don't think so.”

Trigger Mark let out a sound that was somewhere between a sigh and a groan. “And what are you going to do if he gets caught?”

“He won’t get caught,” said Scroll, pawing at the ground. “Unless *someone* blows his cover.”

“Scroll...”

“He has a jacket on,” said Scroll. “No pony can see anything under the jacket. All you have to do is not raise a fuss.”

Trigger Mark opened his mouth to say something, but Scroll cut him off.

“Sit down with us,” he said.

Trigger Mark stared. “What?”

“Maybe we can get you another potato,” Scroll suggested, giving him a little smile. “Have dinner with us, Mark.”

“I can’t...”

“It’s easy,” said Scroll. “Just take a break. Take a deep breath, and say everything’s going to be okay.”

“And what if it isn’t?”

“There has to be a day when it’s okay,” said Scroll firmly. “Otherwise I’m going to go crazy.” He put a hoof on Trigger Mark’s leg and smiled gently. “Come on. How bad can it be?”

Trigger Mark regarded him silently for what seemed like the longest time. Then, he shrugged and turned.

The two of them walked back into the tavern and approached the table. Scroll took his seat, and Trigger Mark pulled up a chair as well.

And everything else for the rest of the night was fine. There was no talk about war, or death, or worries about batteries. It was just five ponies seated around a table, enjoying simple food and drink, telling some bad jokes, and sharing some hopes.

For the first time in what seemed like ages, Scroll felt good about himself.