

Chapter 31

Clip was taking the opportunity to slide down the hall on sponge-skates.

“Wheeeee!” he cried as he slipped past the other foals. “This is fun!”

The unicorns on the fortress used their foal prisoners for a number of menial tasks. While they were too unreliable to do work on the assembly line, they could be called upon for tasks that were either simple enough for them to accomplish, or ones that required their small stature. In this case, a number of the foals were set to scrubbing the floors.

The hollow, stone hallways were large, dimly-lit, and cold. Holes had been cut up-top, near the ceiling, likely as a means of ventilation. All around this part of the fortress it was uninviting, solemn, and joyless.

And in spite of everything, Clip was having a great time.

The other foals looked at him, dumbfounded, sitting next to their wet rags and buckets of soapy water.

Clip’s fun, however, was soon cut short. Something rough shoved him and he slid off to the side, bumping against a wall. He stumbled a little and looked up.

There was the overseer. He wasn’t much to look at, a tall, gangly thin unicorn with tiny glasses. Clip didn’t like looking at him—his small nose was always wrinkled, his mouth drawn back into a sort of disgusted sneer. By his side floated a rod, which he waved around threateningly.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

Immediately, Clip started rubbing one of the sponges on his hooves over the floor in front of him. “Cleanin’,” he said. The rod touched his chin, forcing him to look up into the overseer’s face.

“That should be *all* you’re doing. Understand?”

Clip struggled a nod against the rod.

“Good,” said the overseer, and walked away.

Clip glared at him and, when his back was turned, stuck out his tongue. He didn't like him.

The foals weren't always scrubbing the floors. Sometimes they were clearing the sewers, or dusting out the vents, or maintaining the massive machines that ran in the fortress. What these machines did, Clip had no idea, but they were loud and ugly and they made his lungs hurt and he hated them.

White, on the other hoof, was not having the same kind of good time as Clip. Or any kind of good time, really. In all honesty, he kinda felt like shit.

"You okay there, White?" asked Shine as they washed up in the bathroom.

White looked ahead of him into the mirror. His mane had grown long and scraggly, and there were little black bags under his eyes. Earlier in the mission he had considered if the long-maned look was right for him. Now he didn't care.

He closed his eyes and took a long sniff through his nose. "Iiii did not get a lot of sleep last night."

"Something wrong?"

White turned his head slightly, looking at him through one eye. "You ever have one of those times you wake up in the middle of the night and you really, *really* need to use the bathroom?"

"Uhh... kind of?"

"Well," said White, looking back at the mirror. "That happened last night. I dunno how late it was. Must've been somewhere really, really early in the morning, but I try to sleep it off and I just *can't* get to sleep, and I have to go and I have to *go*. So I get up, and I head to the bathroom. But it's dark and the lights are out. And I lost my candle. So I'm in the bathroom and the lights are out and it's pitch black. I can't see a thing, so I'm just feeling around, trying to find the toilet. But I can't find it."

"So..." Shine narrowed his eyes. "What did you do?"

"I'm still a little fuzzy," said White, "but I think I peed in the sink."

Shine just stared at him for what must have been ten or twenty seconds. Then, his horn glowed a little, and water began to pour from the faucet.

“That, and I’m just... stressed,” said White. “I feel like there’s nothing working.”

“Been there,” said Shine, “you know, I think you’ve got tunnel vision.”

“Hm,” White mumbled. He looked up in the mirror. Shine wasn’t even looking at him, more occupied with shaking out his mane.

“Anyway, see ya later,” said Shine.

“Wait...”

Shine stopped and turned around. His eyebrows raised and his mouth curled back, he pawed jerkily at the floor. “Yes?”

“Look, I get that you don’t want to help me and risk yourself for whatever dumb thing I’m going to do,” said White. He didn’t look him in the face. He just stood facing the mirror, his eyes downcast. “But maybe if you... if the general says anything... tell me.”

“What...”

“Please, Shine, just help me with this,” said White. “It isn’t much.”

Shine stood there, looking at White. White watched him in the mirror, trying to read his face. After a moment, however, Shine sighed. “Okay, fine,” he said. “I’ll try.” White’s face instantly lit up in a bright, beaming smile, so abruptly that Shine drew back in startled shock. “No promises!” he said. “But... okay. I’ll try, if I can.”

“Try to find out about Clip,” said White. “I’ve been asking about where they keep the foals, but they keep avoiding my question. You don’t think they...”

Shine’s face paled. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “These guys are screwed up, but... they wouldn’t just... they wouldn’t just take children and... No.” He walked off, his face a little more disturbed than before.

White stayed behind and washed up in the sink before. He was starting to hate these bathrooms.

White had taken to taking notes, as part of his scheme. He had the starting point down, that is, the basic idea of writing down the details one thinks are important. Unfortunately, he wasn't completely sure where to go from there.

He knew that the various earth ponies were doing work in different areas, presumably working on smaller parts of a larger project.

White didn't have much to go on from there, but he had a guess –[em dash] whatever it was the unicorns were working on, they didn't want the earth ponies to know the whole thing.

What's more, he needed to find Clip. Duster had said that the unicorns had the kids off somewhere else. If he found the kids, he thought, maybe he'd find Clip.

“Hey, you gonna be in there all day?” called Aq's voice from outside.

“Sorry!” called White, emerging from the bathroom. “I just, well...” he looked back at the bathroom. He had known dirty bathrooms and he had known clean bathrooms (to his chagrin the mares tended to have cleaner bathrooms than the stallions). At yet, the bathrooms here, with their gilded faucets and marble urinals, seemed to be trying so very hard to impress him. “I had to go, y'know?”

“I hear ya,” said Aq.

“So, I want to know where the kids are,” said White.

“Oh, this again,” said Aq.

“Aq,” said White, “I get that Monarch is trying to obfuck... obfutu... prevent me from doing my work properly, but that isn't going to happen.”

“Oh, for the love of,” said Aq, “why do you *care*?”

White looked at him. “I can't explain it. Hopefully you'll understand it someday. Hm.” He thought on it. “Maybe Scroll could explain it. I think he said it's called ‘empathy.’”

Aq rolled his eyes. “Monarch wants to see you tonight.”

“Oh boy,” said White. “It’s funny—every time I went to see General Quake he told me to fudge off and... do things with my horn. Things that I don’t think are safe or actually possible. General Monarch can’t get enough of me. I wonder how General Storm would...” He blinked. “Actually, no, I know. She hit me in the head.”

“‘Fudge’?” Aq asked, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes.

“I don’t like to use that kind of language,” said White. “It sets a bad example. Now anyway, back to work.”

With a moratorium on sponge-skating, the task of cleaning went much, much slower. By the time they were finished, and Clip had no idea what time that was, he was worn-out and restless.

As the foals filed down the hallway, he looked around. Despite the crowd of foals, others kept their distance. Clip might not have had wings, but the scars on his back said everything.

They piled into their quarters, stacked wide with bunk beds. As soon as they got in, Clip jumped to the nearest top bunk he could get to. He had to claim it before someone else did. No matter what happened, if he could just get to the highest point, he knew he would be alright.

He looked down at their overseer. It was the same gangly, thin unicorn from before. A rod floated by his side as he looked over the foals distastefully. Clip thought about him as he tried to fall asleep. He didn’t like him.

“Alright!” the unicorn snarled. “Everyone to sleep!”

“I’m hungry...” Clip mumbled.

The overseer gave one last look at them all before turning and walking out of the room. The foals murmured to themselves as the lights went off of their own accord, most of them eager to get to sleep in a bed after the mind-numbing work.

Clip couldn’t sleep very well. He heard the same sound he’d heard every night, some massive thing, rumbling... tumbling... mumbling... He sat up, sighing and brushing his face with a spare hoof. He just couldn’t get to sleep. That *noise* wouldn’t stop.

And so, he decided that if he couldn’t sleep, he *wouldn’t* sleep. And with nary a second thought, he jumped down from his bunk.

All the other foals were asleep. No pony would hear him. Quietly, he tip-hoofed over to the door. It was a giant metal thing with a latch instead of a knob. He got up onto his hind legs and reached for it, but it was too high. Bracing himself, he took a step back, ran, and leapt up. He soared through the air and hit his target on the handle with a thud against the door. He wrapped his hooves around the handle, hanging from it.

It wouldn't open. It was locked. Feebly, Clip wiggled, trying to loosen it, but to no avail. Then, he stopped; he could hear hoofsteps. He froze in fear as the hoofsteps got louder. Then, the handle beneath him turned. He hastily reached a hoof around, desperate to keep hold. He slid down the door, hanging on for dear life, as it slowly opened.

He didn't even breathe, and he silently prayed that his heart was shut up, or else the other pony might hear him.

A figure entered the room, peering into it. "Hmm..." he said. Clip recognized it as the overseer. The unicorn crossed into the room, letting the door swing wide. Clip clenched his eyes, hoping he wouldn't get slammed against the back wall.

His back nudged against the wall, and Clip had to fight not to let out an "oof." Carefully, he slid down between the door and the wall to the floor, and peeked out. The unicorn overseer stepped further into the room, peering over the beds of sleeping and stirring foals.

Soon enough, he turned around and headed back out the doorway. Clip quickly darted behind him, doing his best to keep out of his vision. Clip crept behind him as the overseer turned to lock the door.

"Hmm..." the overseer mumbled. "Could've sworn I heard something..."

The hallway was very dimly lit, and Clip ducked into a corner as the overseer continued down the hall. Thankfully, his hesitancy to breathe had caused his face to turn blue, aiding him in blending into the shadows.

After the overseer turned the corner and vanished, Clip let out a gasp for breath. Timidly, he tip-hoofed forward. Light on his hooves, he made almost no sound against the stone floors.

He had a plan in mind. Get out of here with Carpenter and White and some other ponies too. Get back to the island and make a family with Scroll and Tap and Barrel. And then the whole family could go make a home in Equestria...

Well, that was more of a goal than a plan. He'd need to think of the parts in-between. He wished Scroll were there. Scroll was good at ideas, like that water machine thing.

Creeping down the hall, he looked up at the vents on the wall. If he could find a way up, he might be able to get out and get somewhere else in the fortress. At least, he hoped so.

He could hear hoofsteps coming down from one end of the hall. Not thinking, he burst off down the other end, somewhere he didn't know.

He could hear the hoofsteps gaining on him, following the same direction he was going. He jumped through an open door and found himself at a dead end. Nothing but a storage room of some kind, filled with boxes and barrels and, funnily enough, bags. He froze, but upon hearing the hoofsteps behind him, he had to act.

"...I really just want a new job," said the overseer, trundling into the storage room. "Anything else, I don't care. Just so long as I'm not near the fucking foals."

"Well, good luck on that," said another unicorn. Clip's ears perked up; something seemed oddly familiar about his voice in a way he didn't like. "I've got a similar foalsitting job."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, Monarch's had me play guard duty for that missionary from the island. He's a fruity bastard."

"How fruity?" asked the overseer, accompanied by a squeaking sound. Clip figured he must have sat down on something.

"He sings in the shower," said the other unicorn. "And he's actually *good* at it."

"Oh," said the overseer. "Dang."

"Yeah," said the other unicorn. "He's also been fussy about his mane until this week. I think he's slowing down a little. But he won't stop asking me about that fucking foal."

"Foal?"

"Yeah, he keeps asking about some foal he's looking for. Named Clip. Says soldiers foalnapped

him.”

Clip’s ears perked up. So White *was* here and looking for him. Everything was going to be great!

“What’s he look like?” asked the Overseer.

“He’s pink and he’s got big scars on his back where they cut his wings off,” he said. “I think it’s the same kid I grabbed off the island. Can you believe it? If a pegasus kid washes up on the island, they cut his wings off.” That told Clip who it was. It was Aq.

“Fucking savages, I tell ya,” said the overseer. “I think I’ve seen the colt. Want me to find him and bring him to ya?”

“No, that’s the thing,” said Aq. “Monarch’s given me instructions: he does *not* want White to find that colt.”

“Weird,” said the overseer. “Well...” He made a grunt, as though stretching. “Not gonna question the good general’s orders.”

Clip looked around the box he had hidden in. There were many boxes like it in the room, but this one was his. And it was full of potatoes. Thankfully, out of sight. Unthankfully, he had nowhere to go from there. All he could do was sit and listen, nestled amongst the potatoes.

“So who’re betting on at the game tomorrow?” asked the overseer.

“I don’t bet,” said Aq. “It’s not my thing.”

“Suit yourself,” said the overseer. “Just don’t ask for any of my winnings.”

Clip looked around. He needed to get out of here. He didn’t know what, though. He turned around and looked up the wall, hoping to find some way out. To his delight, he found a vent up above. All he had to do was wait and—

He found himself lifted out of the box and into the air.

“What have we here?” asked the overseer. “We were just talking about you.”

“Funny thing there,” said Aq.

The overseer turned him around to face him. Clip smiled nervously. “Eheh...” said Clip. “Well, now that you’ve found me, you can take me to White... right? Please?”

The overseer turned to Aq. “No, I don’t think so,” he said. “I think we should deal with this a bit more permanently.”

“Yeah,” said Aq. “I remember White said something about how the pegasi just dropped him into the ocean.”

“Hmm...” said the overseer, smirking.

Clip bit his lip. “Oh.”

The Overseer smirked at him, and Clip could think of only one thing he wanted to do to that smug, slimy face in front of him.

He punched it. The overseer let out a yelp and dropped him, and Clip did the only thing he could do. He ran. He ran right out the door and down the hall, both of the unicorns screaming and chasing after him.

White managed to make himself presentable enough, with his mane neatly combed. Of course, White was rarely *not* presentable. He was able to clear through his funk enough to be curious about Monarch’s request... whatever it was. He’d find out soon enough.

The guards graciously opened the wide double doors in the hall—White would never *not* be reminded of the trip he took to Canterlot castle on a field trip once. Except Canterlot castle had more stained glass windows and less inadequate slits in the wall. Perhaps they had it that way so nopony would notice if the red carpet was dirty.

“Ah, Brother White,” said General Monarch. “Glad you could make it.” He was standing by the window, looking outside, smug as always. “So, how are you?”

“I’m okay,” said White. “What are you doing with the workers?”

“Making them work, of course,” said Monarch. “I like to think it’s a way we can happily coexist.”

“I figured you’d say something like that,” said White, unimpressed. “So what’d you want me

for?”

“I thought you could use some time off,” said Monarch. “Follow me,” he said, leading him through a set of doors. “I must say, Brother White, you really aren’t looking well.”

“Oh, darn,” said White. “Well, I’ll freshen up when I get home.”

“It really doesn’t suit you,” said Monarch. “But I think I have the solution. I’d like you to meet someone...”

They emerged from the side of the doorway and were greeted by a unicorn mare—her coat was the same shade of purple as Monarch’s, and she dressed in a frilly gown and silver tiara. She tossed her mane and smiled at them.

“Hello!” she said.

White took a step back, a little alarmed.

“Brother White, I’d like you to meet my daughter Princess,” said Monarch.

“Oh!” said White. “I didn’t know you had...” He looked back at her. “Hi. My name is Brother White.”

“Princess here is having a slumber party,” explained Monarch, “and she’s inviting you.”

“Oh, thank you,” said White. “I’m... heh,” he smiled, “I’m sorry, I’m a little out of it lately.”

“No pony can be fair weather all the time,” said Princess. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Right,” said White, nodding. “So, you said slumber party?”

“How do you like my bedroom?”

White blinked. “It’s...” It was gaudy. Full of reds, pinks, purples and all kinds of cloth and lace. To its credit, it was one of the most earnest displays of *color* he’d seen in the castle.

“It’s colorful,” White concluded.

“I thought so,” said Princess, smiling self-satisfiedly at the drapery. She looked around and snorted. “Oh, *where* are my hoofmaidens?”

“You have hoofmaidens?” asked White.

Princess looked at him agape. “Of *course* I have hoofmaidens! I *am* a princess, after all! How could I not?”

There came a knock on the door.

“Oh, at *last!*” said Princess. “Come iiiin~”

White blinked as the door open and in walked two mares. They were both similar in appearance, tall and indistinguishable apart from the fact that one of them was pink and the other was teal.

Princess walked over to greet her. She kept her legs very straight and seemed to place her hooves down harder than most, which was especially noticeable on the stone floors.

“Glad you could make it!” she said.

“We wouldn’t dream of missing it,” the hoofmaidens droned in unison.

“This is Brother White,” said Princess, lifting a hoof and gesturing to White with an air of pompous grandeur. “He’s my guest.”

“Hello, Brother White,” said the hoofmaidens.

“Uh... hi,” said White.

“Brother White here is an Equestrian,” Princess explained, tossing back the curls in her mane. “So he knows all about slumber parties. Don’t you?”

“Um... Yes,” said White, nodding. “In fact, I have a really good *book* you can read that talks a bit more about—”

“Wonderful,” said Princess, “you can make sure we’re on track. The first thing... braiding manes!”

“That’s one thing...”

The four of them arranged themselves in a circle. White braided one of the hoofmaiden's manes, that hoofmaiden braided her sister's mane—at least White *assumed* it was her sister. In all honesty they kind of creeped him out a little—and that hoofmaiden braided Princess's mane, who in turn worked on White.

“Father says Equestria has a castle like this one,” said Princess, “but it doesn't fly.”

“Well, it doesn't fly, no...” said White. “I haven't been to Canterlot Castle that much. Maybe three times?”

“It sounds splendid. I think I'd like to see it.”

“Oh, you would,” said White. “You really, really would. It, uh...” He paused for a fraction of a second, dropping the hoofmaiden's mane an inch or two as his mind sagged. “It'd suit you,” he said, catching himself and resuming with braiding the hoofmaiden's mane.

“You think so?” asked Princess. White could only imagine what the expression on her face was. “Father thinks so.”

White paused for a moment. “He does,” he said. “Do you talk about that a lot?”

“Sometimes,” said Princess. “We don't talk about a whole lot. He's very busy running the fortress. A pony can only do so much in a day,” she said with a vague gesture of her hoof. [He's in charge of a lot of things, so he doesn't have a lot of time for other things.]

“Not enough time for his daughter?” he asked.

Princess was silent for a few seconds. White felt his own mane go slack a little. “You have a very nice mane,” she said after a while.

“You think so?” asked White, smiling a little. “I haven't really been able to keep good care of it. Been sort of letting it go since the mission started. I...” His smile faltered and he looked down.

“Is something wrong?” asked Princess. “Are you all right?”

“I guess,” said White. “I just... the mission. It's not really going well, honestly. Can't say it's going well when you're split off from your partner.”

“Well, from what father says it was probably a lost cause, all those earth ponies. I heard they sleep in the dirt.”

At this White turned around. “That’s what you’ve heard?” he asked. “Have you ever met an earth pony?”

Princess sat back a little. “Once. About a year ago some of them from the island managed to break up into the castle. I saw them then. They... they found me. I don’t know what would have happened if our soldiers hadn’t gotten in. The look they had at me, they...” Her voice faltered. “They hated me. They absolutely hated me and I knew, just *knew* they wanted to hurt me...”

White relented, drew away. “Your father...” he said. Princess looked up. “He’s done a lot of bad things.”

“He saved you, though,” said Princess. “He told me he’d always look out for a fellow unicorn.”

“Well,” said White, tossing his mane—a braided strand landed over his shoulder, “I have better friends. Earth pony friends,” he emphasized. “You know, there are a lot of earth ponies here. Your father has them working as slaves.”

“Good,” said Princess. “Maybe with them being useful and working towards something productive will help—”

“Do you know *why* those earth pony soldiers hated you?” asked White sharply. “Why they wanted to hurt you? It’s because they’ve had it drilled into them that unicorns are their enemies. And it doesn’t help when Monarch decides to attack them for, for...” He stopped. “Why *does* he attack them?” he asked. “It doesn’t make any sense. The pegasi attack them for food, but you...”

“That...” Princess said, her eyes shifting. “That’s not something I know a lot about. That’s up to my father and the soldiers.”

“Right...” said White. He looked at the hoofmaidens, who were still braiding away. “You have anything to say about this?”

“Not really,” said the pink hoofmaiden.

“I try to stay out of politics,” said the teal one.

“Fair enough...” mumbled White.

“I have a better idea,” said Princess, resuming her ceremonial air. “Why don’t we play a game? Truth or dare! All in favor?”

“Aye,” intoned the hoofmaidens.

“Okay, seriously,” said White, “you two are, like—”

“I’ll go first,” said Princess. “Oh, and I have something else to make it a little more interesting.” Her horn glowed, and a small sack floated up between them. Then, something inside the sack moved, and then emerged a small, flat, clear crystal. “This is something called an Honesty Stone. Whatever we say here we’ll be held to. If somepony dares you, it will hold you do it. And if you tell a lie, well, it will know. So…” She smiled at White. “I pick Dare.”

White narrowed his eyes at her. “Alright,” he said. “I *dare* you to…” He paused. “Go down to the earth pony workshops. See what your father has them doing. Maybe even talk to one of them. Make a friend.”

Princess’s calm, cool expression vanished as the stone hovered in front of her, glowing softly. “Well…” she said. “I guess if you dare me, I’ll have to do it.”

“It doesn’t have to be today,” said White. “But you have to do it.”

“Very well,” said Princess. “Now…” Her smile returned, and the stone floated over to White. “It’s your turn.”

White took the stone in his own magic, and looked at the three of them. “Alright. Since you started with a dare, I’ll pick Truth.”

Princess smiled. “Tell me truthfully, then, Brother White.” She narrowed her eyes. “Do you hate anyone?”

White tilted his head at her and sputtered. “What?” he laughed nervously. “That’s, come one, that’s silly. I don’t *hate* anyone. I—” His eyes went wide. The stone was glowing a bright red, and hissing. “What’s happening? What is this?”

“You lied,” said one of the hoofmaidens.

“No,” said White, as the stone began to emit a high-pitched siren. “That’s wrong! This stone’s

broken!”

“The stone isn’t broken, White,” said Princess. “You lied.”

“*No!*” spat White. “I don’t hate *anyone*. I *can’t* hate anyone, I *don’t!*” But the more he protested, the louder the stone got, until it seemed that it was screaming louder than White was. “I don’t, I swear! It’s just a stupid rock! The stone is wrong. *The stone is wrong!*”

The rock flew to the other side of the room, hitting the wall with a clank before falling to the ground, silent and back to its clear color.

“It’s just a stupid rock...” said White, panting. “I... no, I can’t. I *can’t.*”

And Princess looked, for a moment, as though she regretted what she had just done.

Brother Shine stepped onto his balcony. He didn’t know why—he didn’t *like* being outside. Then again, he didn’t really like being *inside*, either. He didn’t really like anything. He didn’t like the look of the star-filled sky or the view over the ocean, devoid of clouds or warmth. He didn’t even like the air. Up here he’d think that it should be clean and clear, but it was dirty and dusty, no doubt owing to the things they had churning in the belly of the fortress.

He saw a door across the way open up. He saw something rush out, but it was hard to make out in the dark of the night. Narrowing his eyes, he thought he saw something... a pink colt. The colt rushed out the door and looked down at what seemed to be a tumble off a dead end. Shine watched as two more figures emerged from the door, one of them a guard, the other... he couldn’t make him out, as he was behind the guard. The colt turned around. The guard’s horn glowed, and the colt tumbled back over the edge and disappeared. The two unicorns walked to the edge, looked down, and seemed to laugh, before turning and walking back through the doorway.

Shine balked and stepped backwards. He wanted to scream out, but something stopped him. Instead he clenched up slammed his hoof into the ground.

“Something wrong, Shine?” asked a voice behind him. Shine froze. “Is the scenery not to your liking?”

Shine slowly turned around and saw General Monarch standing there, unctuous as always.

“Honestly?” asked Shine. “Not completely...”

“Dear, dear, dear...” said Monarch, walking past Shine to look at where the unicorns and the colt had been. “It seems the guards have been taking some liberties with the workers. No real matter, though.” He smirked. Shine didn’t say anything. “I’ll just have to explain to them that our resources are not always expendable.”

“You’re sick,” Shine whispered. “You’re sick, evil, twisted—”

“Yes,” said Monarch, putting a hoof on Shine’s shoulder, “do feel free to say everything. It’ll be much more satisfying than burying it all and trying to let it out in little passive-aggressive nudges. In all honesty...” He lowered his head to Shine’s ear. “I find it rather refreshing. White’s a bit too polite to tell me exactly what he thinks, though anyone can tell. Ponies like him who wear their hearts on their hooves, always so easy to read. You can read White yourself, can’t you? He’s just getting so worn down. And I must commend you on being such a great friend to him.”

Shine didn’t dare pull away. He just fought off a shudder and stood there.

“Oh, come now,” said Monarch, “not going to continue what you’re saying?”

“W-why do you have us here?” asked Shine, shaking. “We aren’t doing anything. There’s no point to any of this.”

“You needed to get away from General Quake,” explained Monarch. “So I generously offered you a safe haven, in return for your understanding that, heh...” He drew away. Shine turned and saw the smirk. “Nothing you do will amount to anything. And soon White will understand that, as well. Do you understand what the fortress is, Brother Shine? It’s a machine. And you can’t stop a machine with sheer good will.”

Shine looked up at him. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

Monarch laughed. “Because I want you to know exactly where you stand. I’ll bet you’re planning on just telling Brother White everything, aren’t you?” The horn on his head lit up in a dark purple glow. Shine flinched back, feeling a piercing pain in his head.

“Argh!” Shine cried, falling to his knees.

“Kneeling suits you,” Monarch observed. “Even if I were to tell you every secret I have, that little spell would render you mute, should you try to tell White about it.”

“You... you...”

“I!” Monarch put a hoof to Shine’s chin, forcing him to look up into his face. “Am General Monarch. And do you know what one of the best things about being a monarch is?” His horn lit up again, lifting Shine into the air. “I can do anything I like. And I can be assured that everypony works for me. Including you. Including White.” He dropped Shine to the floor. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have other matters to attend to.” And with that, he turned and walked away.

Shine didn’t watch him as he drew away. He just waited until he heard the door shut behind him.

Shine kept his head lowered at his desk. Occasionally he looked up at the door, which stood there. Still. Unmoving. Probably taunting him, but Shine wasn’t sure what the joke was.

The unicorns thought they’d have him as a sort of buffer between themselves and the earth ponies. If an earth pony needed to voice a concern with someone, they came to him. Shine would try to talk it out with them and say he’d look into how he could help fix the problem. He couldn’t, of course—he had no actual authority. Or if he did, the other unicorns wouldn’t be happy with him “exercising” it, and he’d never thought to risk it.

But few ponies came. Many of them knew him from the island, and there was a mutual dislike. They thought he was an asshole. He thought they were assholes. It all worked out fine. Except now he wasn’t feeling so assured in that understanding.

He watched the door. Hours went by, and no pony came. More hours, no ponies. *Maybe the number of hours is inversely proportional to the number of ponies*, thought Shine. *No, wait... that doesn’t make any sense*. His head fell onto the desk and he let out a groan.

More hours, and still no ponies. Then, after all that time and nothing happened, a bell rang, signalling his time was up. He was thankful that now he’d have a chance to be bored and useless somewhere else. Grumbling, he got up from the desk and went out the door behind him.

Somehow, upon entering the hallway, he immediately felt better, though not by much. The hallway was wider and it had better lighting, and Shine swore it must have been *ventilated* better, too.

He passed a few other unicorns in the hallways. None of them minded him. They all had their own circles, and he was part of no pony’s circle. The outsider. *Don’t walk too close to him, he’s*

been around the dirts, thought Shine mockingly, and he probably smells bad.

He looked ahead and saw a few of the guards, laughing loudly about something he was sure he wouldn't find funny if he knew what it was. His eyes focused on Aq, smiling as smugly as ever. Shine remembered the night before as he passed them. They walked on, oblivious to his presence. Shine stopped at the end of the hallway and glared at them, and just before they turned the corner...

“So how much do you like murdering children?”

Aq stopped in his tracks and slowly turned around. The other soldiers were a little slower to catch on, but they followed suit. Aq peered down the hallway at him and took a few steps forward. “Come again?” he asked. “I don't think I got that.”

Shine instantly found he had doubts about what he had just said. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

“Nothing, then?” asked Aq. “Thought so.” He turned to go again.

“How much do you enjoy murdering children?” repeated Shine.

Aq turned around and approached him. Shine looked at him with a feeling of abject loathing, wishing nothing more than to hit him right in that smug smirk. “I don't think that's a very polite question to ask, missionary,” whispered Aq. “Isn't that in your *book* somewhere, missionary? A guest needs to be polite to his hosts?”

Shine spat right into Aq's face. Aq responded by lighting up his horn and rapidly raising a fist to Shine's face. Shine stepped back, flinching.

“You think you can get to me?” asked Aq. His horn lit up, lifting Shine off the ground and slamming him into the wall behind him. Aq wiped the spit from his face and walked up to Shine, pressing magic into his chest. Shine choked, trying to breathe. “I could toss you off the castle just the same,” he said quietly. “Just remember that, missionary.”

Aq stepped away, and his magic turned off. Shine fell from the wall and collapsed into a gasping heap, his chest heaving as he breathed. Aq turned and went back to his friends, leaving Shine on the floor at the end of the hall. After the soldiers turned and left, Shine slowly got to his feet turned in the other direction.

He found White in his room, slouched over the mahogany desk. White lurched up in his seat at the sound of the door opening. For a moment, Shine forgot what he was going to say—White really wasn't looking good.

“What is it?” White asked. “Is something wrong?”

Shine didn't answer immediately. “Sheesh, you look like you didn't get a wink of sleep last night.”

“No...” said White. “Slumber parties... it didn't have a whole lot of slumbering. Or maybe it did, I don't know. I had to retire earlier. It was a distraction from my work and I...” He blinked. “I have no idea what I'm doing, Shine.” He turned to the desk. “I wish Scroll were here... I... I need him.” He looked down at the desk. “Without him I don't know what to do.”

Shine approached him slowly and put a hoof on White's shoulder.

“Well, you know how you asked me for help yesterday and I said no?” asked Shine. White looked up at him. His eyes were wide and almost at tears. “I changed my mind. Let's bring these bastards down.”

What Shine had no way of knowing, however, was that the little pink colt had not, in fact, perished from falling. Quick-hooved as ever, Clip managed to grab onto the side of the fortress.

“Jerks!” he muttered.

Hefting himself across the jagged, rocky face, he managed to secure himself. He found the sides of the fortress were dotted with holes, and he slipped into one of them. He could feel the air moving, and kept a firm hold wherever he could, as though afraid it'd blow right out. *These must be vents or something*, he thought.

He crawled onwards, not having any clue where he was going. Still, he felt better than he had before; nopony would be coming after him with work or telling him what to do. That was definitely a plus. He climbed up and up through the tunnel.

Clip knew what he had to do: he had to find Brother White. White would know what to do. And they'd escape together. Ooh! Maybe they could save *all* the foals and the other prisoners, too! That'd make the rest of the ponies on Earthquake Island love him! Then they'd all join the Fraternity and their mission would be a success, and they could all go home to Equestria and

Scroll and White could get married and adopt him! It was all going to be perfect! Just as soon as he could find him...

But for now, he needed to sleep.

When he woke up, he looked around, remembered where he was, and decided that he needed a map, so he made a mental note as he was climbing to somehow find a piece of paper and some crayons. He'd also need breakfast.

More tunnels branched off to the sides. He would need a lot of crayons. He went down one of the vents, and his face lit up upon seeing what appeared to be an exit. However, caution set in as he heard a voice.

"So, how did it go?" asked the first one, a stallion's.

"Well, I asked the question you told me," said another voice, a mare's.

Clip crept forward and peeked just enough so he could see: two unicorns, both the same shade of purple. One of them he instantly recognized as General Monarch.

"He didn't take it well," she continued. "He got very upset. Why was that?"

Monarch smirked. "Princess, many ponies look at themselves a certain way. Ponies like Brother White especially have very special self-images. It defines them. And if you can take that self-image and take it away... reveal a certain amount of self-deception, well... some ponies just can't handle it."

"It seems he couldn't," concluded Princess. She looked away from him just slightly, her eyes flitting to the side. Clip backed up, hoping her wandering eyes wouldn't spot him in the vent.

He decided that this was not the way to exit. And he didn't know exactly what he was hearing, but he knew it was about White, and it wasn't good.

He scurried off down the tunnels, figuring his chances were much lower if he popped out the end with the evil general. He'd have to find another way out. And a map. Or he'd make a map—*Paper and crayons*, he reminded himself.

He went down the vents more or less at random, wondering if he shouldn't have done something else. Maybe he should've taken a ball of yarn to map out a trail or something. If the alternative

hadn't been certain death by falling into the ocean, Clip might have thought this had been a bad idea. However, while he was considering ideas, he didn't pay attention, and slipped down one of the chutes. Too startled to let out a cry, he fell out of a hole in the wall and crashed into a box, knocking it over. By the time he looked up, the box was on top of him, and everything was dark save for a hole where light streamed in.

"What was that?" called a voice. Clip stayed silent and listened to the sound of hoofsteps. "Someone in there?"

No, thought Clip, nopony in here. Go away, please.

The other pony seemed to oblige, because he could hear the pony walking away. And then, Clip got another idea.

There are differences between working for yourself and working for others. Carpenter came to realize these differences, and how much he preferred working for himself. At his old shop on the island he carved out his own indispensable niche, built what he wanted, supported himself and his son, and his wife while she lived.

Perhaps part of the problem was that instead of his own personal carpentry work, he was another interchangeable cog in the unicorn assembly line, working with metal rather than wood, constructing he didn't know what. It was only his concern for Buzz that kept him from doing something stupid to get himself killed.

He had heard talk that there was an area on the castle where they were working with wood. The unicorn that had spoken to him on his arrival had said there would be room for him, but that turned out to be a load of shit.

A unicorn was full of shit. Carpenter's world had never been so shaken.

Rather than working with wood, Carpenter instead had to pull a lever to fasten bolts to a piece of metal. It was monotonous, and the lever called for just enough force for it to be inconvenient, as well. Soon, he fell into a dull rhythm, pulling the lever every time the assembly line brought down the next bit of metal. Every so often, a unicorn guard or overseer would pass by and look over his shoulder.

And it just so happened that today he was working right next to Duster. He had known Duster, briefly, years ago on the island before Duster had been captured. Not in any close capacity, but

their mutual imprisonment on the fortress had given them a sort of base to work from, and they seemed to get along well enough.

“So I met with the new unicorn behind the desk,” said Duster.

“Yeah?” asked Carpenter, pulling his lever again. “He any different?”

“I dunno,” said Duster. “He seems to pretend he cares more. Kind of odd...”

Carpenter raised an eyebrow. He was at this point barely paying attention to his work, just enough to pull the lever. After a few weeks here it had become routine, mechanical, and automatic. That was another thing he preferred about his real job: carpentry took attention and dedication. Had he been a sentimental type, he might have even said it took love. “Odd?” he asked with another pull. “Explain.”

“Asked me to get him information or something. Was talking about Monarch not wanting us to have the whole picture...” said Duster. “Somehow I don’t think he’s from around here.”

“He have a name?” asked Carpenter.

“Yeah,” said Duster. “Brother White. I think he’s involved with that Shine asshole.”

“Oh no...” said Carpenter.

“What?”

“No, no no no no no no...” Carpenter moaned. “Why does that prancing faggot follow me *everywhere*?” He shuddered. “I think he’s got a *thing* for me or something.”

“Huh?” asked Duster. “White?”

“No, Black,” said Carpenter. “*Yes* White. He was one of the new missionaries that came over when Shine and the shitwing got run off. Guess he found his way over here.” He groaned. “He’s going to be the death of me...”

“What did he do?” asked Duster.

“Sing songs, knock at my door too many times, and just being a huge fucking faggot.”

“Faggot?” asked Duster. “Huh... he *did* seem like a flamer,” he mused. He was quiet for a minute as the sounds of machinery droned around them. “Was he any good?”

“Huh?” asked Carpenter, his head snapping to the side.

“At singing,” said Duster. “Was he any good?”

Carpenter stared at him. “Why the fuck do you care? We’re stuck doing... *this* shit and you want to know if the horner’s good at singing?”

Duster shrugged. “Just wondering.”

Carpenter muttered to himself. “Well I *guess*.”

They continued their dull, monotonous work for as long as the horner overseers told them to. Carpenter couldn’t tell if they had worked for hours upon hours on end, or if it simply felt that way from the boredom. Eventually the bell rang, and they filed out of the factory.

Carpenter felt choked here, as though buried underground. He hadn’t been outside in the sun and air since his capture, and he had no idea where in the fortress he was. It all felt like an underground prison.

The unicorns corralled them to their living quarters, which he had to admit weren’t notably worse than what he was used to. The bedding was about the same, though there were no windows. It was dull and stuffy in the rooms, which had four to six stallions sleeping in bunks. As luck would have it, Carpenter’s room was empty for the time being. The unicorns, he heard, were not above executing ponies who were too much of a problem. He kept his head low and did what they asked him to do. Just enough, at least.

He sat down on his bed and sighed, and looked around. A broken table he’d fixed up. A rotted trunk. An upside-down cardboard box. A candleholder whose occupant was to its last inch. Wait, a cardboard box?

“Mister Carpenter!” said the box in a loud whisper.

Carpenter nearly jumped behind his bed, but after getting over how startled he was, he peered forward. “Clip?”

“I’m in a box!” said Clip. “Don’t tell anypony. I’m hiding.”

Carpenter, as though checking just to be sure, lifted the box and saw Clip sitting there.

“You snuck all the way over here?” asked Carpenter.

“Uh-huh,” said Clip. “Don’t tell anypony I’m here. They want to kill me. Anyway, you’re gonna have to start over on the boat.”

“The...” Carpenter blinked. “The boat?”

“Yeah,” said Clip. “We’re gonna take more ponies with us.”

“I...”

“It’s gonna need to be a biiiiig boat.” He made a wide gesture with his hooves.

“I haven’t exactly had a lot of wood lately,” said Carpenter. “I don’t see them growing any forests.”

“Oh...” said Clip, sinking slightly. “Well... have you seen White?”

Carpenter groaned. “He’s around,” he admitted. “I haven’t seen him, but I know a guy who’s seen him. He’s probably fine.”

Clip lifted his head up, smiling. “That’s great! I wanna see him.”

Great, then you’ll leave me alone, though Carpenter. “You just wait here. I can sign up to set an appointment.”

“Um,” said Clip, “you wouldn’t happen to have any food, would you? I haven’t had breakfast.”

“Um...” Carpenter looked around. There was a stale piece of bread on the table. “Sure, you can have this.” He tossed the piece of bread over to Clip, who caught it and immediately started gnawing on it. “You just stay in your box while I go take care of that.”

He left Clip to chew on the bread and exited through the door. There were some hallways and a small communal area, but it wasn’t very well-decorated—merely a table and not enough seats for it. On the wall was a dirty sheet of paper, with *Missionary Appointments* half-heartedly scrawled on it in loopy, uneven writing.

“Hey,” he said, looking around at a dour pony splayed on a rotten wooden seat, “Any of you guys got a pencil or a quill or something?”

The other pony just shrugged vacantly.

“Great,” he muttered. “Just great. Like I’m almost done with a chair and there’s not enough wood left. Cut the leg too short…” He paused. “My son made a three-legged stool, once,” he said to no pony in particular. “It wobbled.”

There was a ruffling sound as the other pony got up and shuffled out of the room. Carpenter looked at him as he left. “Well, fuck you, too,” he said. He stared at that sign-up sheet. Here he was, about to petition for an audience with one of his least-favorite ponies. Or he would if he could find a fucking pen.

“Down here,” said Shine, leading White down a dark staircase.

“What—” began White.

“Monarch’s got ears everywhere,” said Shine. “If we’re gonna take ‘em apart, we’re going to do it down here, away from the glitz and the prying ears.”

“Eyes,” corrected White. “The saying is ‘prying eyes.’”

Shine stopped and looked back at him. “That doesn’t make any sense,” he said. “We’re worried about ponies listening to us talking, not looking at us.”

“Yeah,” said White, “but I don’t think ears can ‘pry.’”

“Whatever,” said Shine, heading back down.

“Shine?” asked White. “What happened? You weren’t like this the other day.”

Shine stopped. He opened his mouth, ready to tell him about what Monarch had said. But as he tried, no sound came out.

“Shine?” White repeated, walking next to him.

Shine turned and looked at him, and then after a pause, tried to answer again. “My... my magic,” he said. His horn lit up and a small ball of light appeared at the end. It lit up both of their faces, but didn’t extend further. “I don’t have much in the way of magic. Just some lighting spells. Lots of ponies have them, but mine... well, they *were* supposed to be very good. They made ponies feel happy when they saw them. Now...”

White tilted his head. “Now what?”

“It’s gone,” said Shine. “I can’t conjure up more than... more than a flashlight. I miss it. And I want it back. I... I couldn’t take this mission. It broke me down.”

White took a breath. “I don’t think I’ve been better for the wear, myself,” he said, trying to give a comforting smile.

“The phrase is ‘worse for the wear,’” said Shine. “Wait, no...”

“Anyway,” said White, shaking his head and continuing downstairs. “What was it you found?”

Shine pushed past White, ducked into a small broom closet, and pulled him inside. His horn lit up, dimly illuminating the room. White stepped away from what was an almost threateningly-dirty mop. Shine put his ear to the door.

“Anypony listening?”

Shine paused. “No,” he said. He slowly drew back from the door. “We’re alone.”

“In the closet,” said White, nodding.

Shine stepped away from the door and revealed a few sheets of parchment. “So, what’ve we found out about whatever it is that Monarch has them working on?”

“I don’t know,” said White. “Some kind of framework or casing or—”

Shine unrolled the parchment. White looked at it and couldn’t make it out. Just looked like some round things. “Casings,” Shine explained. “Made to hold a large amount of a blasting agent.”

White looked up at him. “What does that mean?”

“It means bombs,” said Shine.

White sank. “Oh yeah,” he said. “Those. They’ve been dropping those on the island for a while.”

Shine’s expression drooped. “Oh,” he said, sounding disappointed. “So we haven’t found out anything new.”

“No...” said White. “But we can still work with this. We know what they’re doing. If we know what we’re doing we can... we can mess it up. Subvert it! That’s a word Scroll would like. I think. He’s never actually *used* it but it just sounds like something he’d like.”

“This Scroll sounds like someone very special.”

“Yeah,” said White. His mouth pulled back into a smile as he drifted into a sort of reverie. “His is. I... he means a lot to me. I hope he’s okay. I mean, they’re less likely to try and murder him, seeing as he’s an earth pony and all.” He looked at Shine. “Did they try to—”

“Yeah,” said Shine. “Quake decided he’d had enough of my ‘stupid fucking-ass face’ and tried to stomp my head in. Sky flew away first. Kind of obvious, really. When you have wings it’s easier to get away from the landlocked. He thought he had a chance—maybe he could minister to the pegasi and get them to stop their attacks.” He was silent for a moment. “That didn’t work.”

“I think Sky’s still okay,” said White. “At least... we saw him when the pegasi attacked a few months back. That’s about all we know. Storm talked about him being ‘useful’ or something...”

“Great,” said Shine. “That’s... that’s just great.” He shook his head. “Whatever, we have to deal with this floating hunk of rock first.”

“How do we do that?” asked White.

“Well, we know that they’re manufacturing bombs,” said Shine, “and we know that they’re using the earth pony labor to do it.”

“If the earth ponies knew exactly what they were making,” said White, “they wouldn’t be very happy with it. And if we can find out where the bombs are, maybe we could sabotage it.” His face lit up. “Ooh, sabotage! That’s *another* word Scroll would like!”