

## Chapter 33

Princess was a graceful sleeper. She awoke in the morning bright and ready to do anything. Of course, living as she did, she had relatively few obligations, doing mostly as she pleased.

Her hoofmaidens brushed her long mane as she judged herself in her bathroom mirror. They helped her into a fancy dress, full of frills and laces and things that may have been either gems or nicely cut glass, and she went out onto the terrace.

Princess's room occupied the second-tallest tower on the Fortress. The tallest, of course, was reserved for her father the general. She often liked to stand on the balcony and look down over the stone walkways and paths outside, and then out over the vast sea.

With the clear skies, the sunlight illuminated the stone of the fortress. It was gray, dusty, and hot, the air just above the surface rippled in a haze. She always found it uncomfortable to walk on the hot stone. But then, that was what the litter was for.

It had been a long time since she'd seen any land, apart from small islands. There was the one small island that her father was at war with, but she had never seen it herself. Whenever they approached, she was escorted to a lower level of the Fortress. This was, her father said, to protect her from the earth pony cannons that might be aimed at the tower, where she may be vulnerable. Seeing sometimes that battlements and other towers were gone after a battle, destroyed by these cannons, she saw no reason to doubt her father.

She turned around and went back in from the balcony, and pondered what she'd do. Her father would be busy doing something that didn't concern her.

She looked at herself in the mirror, tilting her head to see how she looked at different angles. "So," she said, "how do I look?"

"Beautiful," said one of the hoofmaidens.

"As always," said the other.

"Yes," said Princess, smirking. "As always." Satisfied, she stood up. "That will be all for now. I will go join my father for breakfast."

And with that, she made her way to the door out of her room. In the hallway outside there was an elevator, but she felt that she'd rather walk and take the stairs down. It was a long, marble

staircase, with windows letting the light stream in. She mentioned at one point that stained glass would improve it. Her father had agreed, but they hadn't quite gotten around to that yet.

Her father was entertaining some guests; the usual crowd, bedecked in their usual fineries and clothing. One of them, a stallion whose name she could never remember, kissed her hoof as usual.

"Princess, you are looking lovely today," he said, mindful of her father's watchful eye. Monarch, however, simply enjoyed his position from atop his throne at the head of the table.

The table was stocked in all manner of greens; fruits, vegetables, salads, grasses. One of them, a stallion in a monocle, spoke proudly.

"Of course," he said, "it all comes from the hydroponics *I* run. I should like to thank General Monarch for his forward-thinking." He raised a glass to Monarch, bowing his head deferentially. "It is thanks to you that our wonders are possible." Princess saw her father give a satisfied smile.

Down at the other table sat the two missionaries, White and Shine. Neither of them seemed to be eating much; Shine merely stirred his salad around half-heartedly with his fork, while White simply stared down at it.

Princess regarded White; she noticed his cutie mark, a big gleaming smile, and found it a bit odd that White himself wasn't smiling.

The gentlestalliony unicorn was talking about something, but after a point, Princess found that she had completely lost track of the conversation. The unicorn sitting across from her had such an enormously huge mouth that she had gotten too distracted to process what he was saying.

Thankfully, the other unicorn was talking mostly for his own benefit about his hydroponics and his "insulated agriculture," as he called it, so he didn't notice that Princess had zoned out, preferring to focus on her salad.

Well, she figured, the salad was good enough for the unicorn to be proud of it.

As she finished her salad and daintily patted her muzzle with a napkin, she looked over at the missionaries again. Neither of them had touched their food, and White was mumbling something to Shine. Shine, however, saw Princess looking at them and roughly tapped White on the shoulder. White looked at her with a start, and then returned to his salad. Which is to say that he

stared at his salad and didn't touch it. Princess narrowed her eyes and looked at her father. Monarch didn't seem to have noticed, already engaged in a conversation about marble or something.

After the breakfast, she cordially greeted each of her father's guests. They all bowed in turn, some of them asking to kiss her hooves. Everyone except for the missionaries, who were muttering to each other about their own business. As one fop fawned over her, she heard White asking someone out of the corner of her ear.

"He's a little pink colt with scars. You'd know him in a second if you saw him. I just want—"

She turned to look at him. He was talking with a soldier and a businesspony, neither of whom seemed particularly interested in what he was saying.

"Well, I'll keep an eye out for him," said the soldier, shrugging in a manner that suggested he probably wouldn't.

"Look, I've been worried—"

"*Brother White*," boomed the voice of her father. "You haven't greeted my daughter yet!"

White stopped in his conversation and looked at the general. "I..." he said. Then, in seeming reluctance, he turned to Princess, nodded politely, and said. "Good day." Then he turned to the guard. "Look, I just need to see the foals, wherever it is you keep them."

"Brother White," sighed Monarch. "You do not work with the foals. They are not your concern. In any case, this is not the time to accost us with your concerns."

"I want—" White started.

"If the foal is of that much concern to you, then trust us when we say we will look for him and tell you when we find something out."

White stood and looked at him. His face did not betray a feeling of reassurance.

Princess decided that this was the time for diplomacy. "Brother White," she said, approaching him graciously. "You must trust we are not deaf to your concerns. I will help to see it myself if I can."

“Right,” said White. “If you can.” He turned to look at Shine, before turning to the others. “I’m sorry, you’ll have to excuse us. We have work to do.”

“You are excused,” said Monarch.

Princess watched as White and Shine left the hall. *How peculiar their behavior*, she thought. *It must be an Equestrian thing*. She looked to her father and saw him smiling to himself as he watched them leave.

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The upper levels of the Fortress were a veritable promenade of ponies on parade in their fine clothes, walking through halls of marble and granite.

One short unicorn in an expensive suit and tie bowed to her. “Your majesty!” he exclaimed. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your presence?”

“Merely a whim,” said Princess, smiling.

“Well, we are delighted to see you here.”

Princess nodded and walked past. She looked through a few windows. One window was a jeweler, another had a pony behind a counter shuffling papers. All of them stopped what they were doing and bowed their heads.

“But we don’t have any *books*,” she heard a voice say. Her ears pricked up. Brother Shine.

“No, we don’t,” said Brother White’s voice. It was high and energetic, but shaky. “But we got something else.”

Princess turned around. She saw the two missionaries, White and Shine, standing at the other end of the walkway. White was floating a pamphlet in front of Shine’s face.

“‘*Pearly’s Earlies*’?” asked Shine, his face screwed in confusion.

“They’re little simple things for ponies to read when they wake up.” White began walking. “It’s a simple message, and the idea is that the pony reads it and tries to apply it throughout the day.”

“The name’s still odd.”

“Well, it was that or ‘*White at Night*,’” said White, “and I don’t think that’d work as well.” He stopped and turned around. “Or maybe it could be ‘*Time for a Shine*?’” Shine made a face, which White didn’t notice. “I actually think I could come up with a number of—”

“No,” said Shine, rolling his eyes, “I think I’m good with *Pearly’s Earlies*. We’ll just see that *they* all think of—”

“I did not expect to see you two up here,” said Princess. Both of the missionaries stopped and turned around, staring at her. “Don’t all ask to kiss my hoof at once.”

“Well, I wasn’t...” mumbled White.

“And what do we have here?” asked Princess, peering at the pamphlet floating by White’s side. “Oh, *do* let me have a look.”

And without waiting for a word of welcome or protest from Brother White, her horn lit up and she floated the pamphlet in front of her. “‘*Pearly’s Earlies*,’” she read. There was drawing on it—simple black and white, drawn with little more than a quill, and little skill besides. “Oh, isn’t this dear,” she said, as she read, “*Everypony sometimes has a lot they have to deal with. Sometimes we see them and we wonder ‘should I do something?’*” She turned a few pages. “*So whenever you see another pony in need, don’t hesitate to ask how you can help!*” She looked up at White. “Now, that is something, Pearly.” She smiled. “I *can* call you Pearly, right? That’s your name?”

White didn’t respond.

“It’s quaint, really,” said Princess, floating the pamphlet back to him. “Though I don’t know how the others will feel. I suppose it’s something we can all apply.”

“Come on, White,” said Shine, walking on. “We have something to—”

Princess placed a hoof in front of him, stopping him. “I wasn’t *finished*, Shine,” she said.

Shine balked and took a step backward, his gaze switching back and forth between White and Princess.

She looked back at White. “You know, I’ve been thinking about how much fun we had at that slumber party,” she said, smirking at him. “About our little game.”

White looked at her, his face a hard, blank gaze.

“I was just wondering,” said Princess, tapping her chin with her hoof. “Who is it?” she asked.

White stood there for a moment. Not answering, he looked at her with that flat, blank stare.

“What do you mean?” he asked at length.

“What do I mean?” asked Princess. “I want to know who it is that you hate?” She smiled. “Is it me?” She laughed. “No, you just met me. Perhaps it’s someone from the island. Or perhaps my father?”

White didn’t answer.

“Well?” she asked, her smile faltering just a little. “Say something,” she said, her voice a little harder.

“I don’t hate anypony,” said White quietly.

Princess threw up her hoof and laughed. “Oh, White, you’re *adorable*,” she said, casting a dismissive wave of her hoof. “What other lies do you tell yourself?” she asked. She looked back at the pamphlets. “Oh, do you tell yourself that maybe those little pieces of paper will make a difference?”

White took a breath and said, in a flat, measured tone, “Is there something I can do for you?”

Princess narrowed her eyes. “I expect you could be a little more *deferential* to your hosts. My father, after all, did save your life a few times. As he did yours, Shine.” Shine, however, still didn’t answer. “After all, don’t you bow to your princesses in Equestria?”

“You’re not my princess,” said White. “Sorry.”

Princess stood there and looked at him. Then, she said. “You’re lying,” she said, “when you said you don’t hate anypony.”

“Why?” asked White. “Because of a rock?”

Princess smiled. “There’s the stone,” she said, nodding. “There’s also the way you... *regarded* the stone.” White gave a grimace, and she smirked again. “It’s true, isn’t it?”

“Speaking of that game,” said White. “I believe I gave you a dare.”

“I...” Princess paused.

“Do tell me how it works out when you’ve done it,” he said. Seizing an opening, he walked past her. “Come on, Shine,” he said.

And Princess stood there, watching after him. “I *am* your princess!” she yelled after them. “You will *recognize* me!”

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Princess believed, as she had learned as a filly, that bigger was always better. Her father had taught her that, and his throne room was a testament to that philosophy—ceilings so high a pegasus could dive-bomb from the ceiling, and great black granite throne at the end of the hall, with another, slightly smaller seat for herself. Truly, the throne room was a testament to General Monarch’s might and authority. And General Monarch filled his throne, and the hallway with his resplendent, royal regality. He was tall, powerful, firm, and imposing even when seated.

He did not notice her as she entered the throne room, as he was discussing something with a soldier. The conversation, however, ended before Princess was in earshot. That didn’t bother her, however; she had little interest in those affairs.

As the soldier left, Monarch noticed her. “And what brings you here?” he asked.

“Nothing,” said Princess, tossing her head and taking her seat next to him. “Nothing *compels* me to come here. I am a princess, and I come here of my own volition.”

Monarch smiled. “Good to see you taking your own initiative,” he said. “It shows the kind of backbone a ruler requires.”

“As I hope I do,” she said.

She looked down the hallway. The room was so long, and their thrones so high, that it forced a pony seeking audience to walk all the way, the thrones looming over them in the process. A simple psychological tactic, and something of a cliché, but nevertheless effective.

“I am curious,” said Princess, after a pause. “About the stone I used for my slumber party with Brother White.”

“Ahh,” said Monarch, smirking. He turned to face her, looking down at her. His throne was elevated a noticeable amount above hers. “You wonder if it was real; if it truly did reveal a lie.”

Princess nodded, and Monarch returned to his forward-facing position.

“Oh, the stone is real. Truth and lies are very distinct, most of the time. But really, it doesn’t even matter. I could have been a fake and it would accomplish the same thing.”

“Oh?” asked Princess. “And what is that?”

“Ponies like Brother White,” said General Monarch, “like to tell lies to themselves. They like to lie *about* themselves. Brother White has a conceit drawn up that he’s noble and selfless and all-loving to everypony. The kind of pony who says he’ll accept you as a true friend no matter what you do to him. To someone like that, the notion that they’re capable of hatred, an emotion they hold as the most evil concept in existence, is almost unbearable.”

“He sounds quite pompous if he truly believes that,” said Princess, puffing herself up.

Monarch chuckled. “You should have seen him before he arrived. Ponies like him try so hard to be strong, but they’re no less breakable than anyone else. For someone like Brother White, we confront him with a lie.”

“And then what does he do?”

“He buries it. Tries to suppress it, to forget about it. It’s nothing new; he’s done it to himself for a while. But after a while it gets harder to put from his mind. The stone is merely a tool of confrontation.” He stood from his seat and began to walk down the hall. “Of course, it needn’t have been true. Sometimes, you only need to present them the *possibility* that they’re wrong, and it all begins to crumble.”

Princess nodded, pondering it for a moment. “How extraordinary,” she said, “not only do we have weapons that can break the body, but the mind as well. A diverse arsenal, indeed.”

The doors at the end of the hallway opened, and two soldier entered. A smile grew on Princess’s face as she watched them walk down the long walkway, and she recognized one of them.

“Aq,” she said, rising from her seat and taking long, grand steps down to the floor, “I’m delighted to see you.”



“You are beautiful as ever, Princess,” said Aq. He approached her, bowed his head, took her hoof, and gently kissed it.

The other guard walked over and whispered something to Monarch, who nodded.

“Daughter dearest,” said Monarch, “I have business to attend to.”

“We will escort you, sire,” said the soldier.

“No need,” said Monarch, stepping down from his throne, “I have no need of escorts.”

“Understood, sire.” He turned to Princess and nodded politely.

General Monarch left, taking long strides down the hall. The other soldier, clearly having nothing better to do, followed slowly after. Aq, however, remained.

“I hope that you won’t say you don’t require my company,” he said, laughing slightly.

Princess raised her hoof to her face and chortled into it. “Why, Aq, I would never. In fact...” She raised a hoof to her mouth in a coy grin. “I had an idea of something you could do for me.”

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Princess didn’t say much as she progressed down the stairways. White had given her a dare. Stupid as it was, it wouldn’t become of her to not do it. And it wouldn’t take much effort.

She’d chosen Aq to accompany her. He was more familiar with the earth ponies, she reasoned, having faced them in combat. He was a loyal guard, and she enjoyed his company.

“Your Highness, are you sure you want to do this?” he asked, leading her down the stairs. “I don’t think you’ll enjoy your time down here.”

“Oh, I’m not concerned,” she said. “Simply entertaining Brother White’s dare.”

“His what?”

“Oh, simply a game,” she explained. “He wanted me to pay a visit to the earth ponies.” She paused. “What is it exactly that they *do*?” She asked.

“Whatever we need them to do. For example, some of them tend to the hydroponics,” said Aq.

“Yes, I recall that.”

“And others we have working the assembly lines,” said Aq. He let out an amused chuckle. “We also have them manufacturing our munitions. I like the irony there.”

Princess smiled. “Yes, I agree.”

“They’re mostly here on the lower levels,” said Aq, explaining further. “We have them divided based on what they’re doing. Some of the higher-ups have stakes down here where they can use the labor for their own purposes. Once they’ve cleared it with the General.”

“That... sounds familiar,” said Princess. “I think White may have mentioned that at some point.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Well, he says that the earth ponies have a large forest on their island. That’s how they grow their food and build their houses.”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Aq, in a listless, dismissive tone.

They came up to a stone door, guarded by two soldiers who straightened their posture at her appearance.

“Your highness!” said one of them. “We didn’t expect you today!”

“You may be forgiven for your lack of expectance,” said Princess, careful to choose the biggest words she could think of. She even made a note to herself check whether *expectance* was indeed a word. “I merely wished to see the workers.”

The guards exchanged a nervous glance.

“Well?” asked Princess, tapping her hoof on the floor. “Open the door, if you please.”

The guard sighed and opened the door. Aq stepped in front of Princess.

“Let me go first,” he said. “I feel it only proper.”

Princess nodded. She looked at his demeanor; he seemed uneasy here. His eyes kept darting around, and his body was more tense.

“Does something trouble you?” she asked.

He looked at her and paused for a moment before he answered. “Your highness, I am simply... concerned. I do not think this is a suitable place for you to be.”

Princess noted that. The stone around her was not of marble or granite. Just... rock. Perhaps the kind of rock had a name; she could just imagine White saying something about his friend Scroll around now. “I see...”

“I do not presume to impose upon you, you understand,” said Aq, raising a cautious hoof. “Just... that’s my opinion. Your decision is yours to make.”

She smiled. “Thank you,” she said, nodding her head politely, “but I’ve made my decision.”

Aq straightened up. “Understood,” he said. “Just... I request you let me lead you. If things turn... unsavoury, I suggest you run.”

He led her through the door and onto a metal scaffolding. Before them was a massive chamber, below them a configuration of tables where earth ponies sat, eating what appeared to be rejects from the hydroponics. Princess first noticed the metal scaffolding, steel beams and chainlink. Not many structures in the upper levels were made of metal unless it was decorative or part of the machinery. Most of what she was familiar with had been masterfully chiseled.

She looked over the edge down at the crowd. “So these are the earth ponies,” she said. “I wonder what White wanted me to see.”

“Excuse me?” asked Aq.

“Nothing, nothing,” said Princess, making a shooing motion with her hoof. “Could we go down?” she asked. “Get closer?”

Aq’s eyes flitted to the door for just a moment before he looked back at Princess. “Yes, your highness,” he said.

Aq led her to an elevator, and they went down to the floor below. Some of the earth ponies looked up at them, but they mostly continued going about their meals. As the elevator door opened on the bottom, Princess felt a twinge of annoyance that they didn’t notice her more. A cacophony of noises met her ears as she heard fragments of the ponies’ conversations.

“...tastes awful. I swear I’d rather eat dirt...”

“Scuse me, I need to piss.”

“...I actually miss General Quake. He was funny.”

Princess looked to Aq. “Stay close to me,” he said, keeping himself huddled next to her.

“Hey!” called a voice. “We haven’t had a lady horner down here before!”

The other earth ponies turned to look at her. The room got quiet, and then they started to murmur, and the murmuring got louder.

Aq signalled to the guards above with his hoof, and they moved. “Princess, I advise we get somewhere safer.”

“Hey!” shouted one earth pony. “Haven’t seen any mare horners before.”

“Yeah, thought you’d have cunts on your foreheads!”

The jeers rose and Princess froze.

“Princess! Princess!” Aq called. “Move!”

Princess, for perhaps the first time in her life, didn’t know what was going on.

“Princess!” Aq shouted again.

She followed as the jeering filled her ears. Aq looked up at the rafters. “I need increased guard oversight!” he called, brandishing his rifle with his magic. Aq led her out a door into a vacant hallway. She could still hear shouts and jeers from the other room, but only dimly.

“Are you alright?” asked Aq.

“I’m... I’m fine, thank you,” said Princess, shaking her head. “That was... unsettling.”

“We’re lucky they didn’t try worse,” said Aq. “I would also suggest, with respect, that you don’t tell them you’re the general’s daughter. They... would not respond well to that.”

“I see...” said Princess. “Well, is that all?”

“No,” said Aq, leading her down the hall. “We have more places carved out for them,” he said. “Different work areas and the living quarters.”

“Well,” she said, “can you show me?”

Aq paused. “Yes,” he said eventually. “Right this way.”

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“This is one of the hydroponics rooms,” said Aq, opening a door.

Princess stepped through, into a large room with a high ceiling. Across the floor were long tables in rows, vats of water with plants growing in them. There were a few earth ponies milling around, not seeming to have noticed them, absorbed in their work. Though whether they were genuinely interested in doing it or simply pressed their by the guards—big burly unicorns wielding batons that sparked and crackled—was anypony’s guess.

“This is where they grow all of our food?” asked Princess, walking over to one of the tables. She inspected a tray filled with growing cabbage, smiled, and turned to the beat-red earth pony mare in attendance. “You’ve done an admirable job,” she said. “I heartily commend you on the successful fruits of your efforts.”

“Fuck you, lady,” said the mare. She moved on, and Princess was left there for a few seconds to process the remark.

After a pause, she turned to Aq. “These... earth ponies have very coarse language, don’t they?”

“She will be reprimanded, I assure you,” said Aq.

“That will not be necessary,” said Princess, waving a hoof. “I am above such pettiness. Please, let’s continue the tour.”

Aq nodded and led her to the door.

More guards lined the halls. Aq seemed relieved, but Princess found the scenery was starting to cramp on her. It didn’t help that the halls were narrow and they often had to push past earth ponies who were going to whatever it was they were doing, all the while shooting toxic glares at

the unicorns.

“These earth ponies are exceedingly rude,” said Princess. “You there!” She said to a passing earth pony who walked with a slight slouch. “You should straighten up your posture. Walking around as such will only make your back worse.”

The earth pony stared at her. He didn’t seem old, though the years did not look kind to him. He walked with a limp and a sullen face, making him look tired and worn-out.

“Excuse me?” he asked.

Princess cleared her throat before continuing, “I merely think that improving your posture would be highly beneficial. It would improve your—”

“If I wanted some horner twat to talk at me about what I do with myself, I’d go to White,” he said.

Aq stepped up to him. “You will *not* interrupt her!” he said, raising his rifle up just a little. The earth pony, to Princess’s surprise, widened his eyes and, to her slight satisfaction, drew himself up.

“You!” he said. “You’re that bastard!”

“I always find myself hoping I don’t run into you ponies again,” said Aq in a flat voice.

Princess looked between the two ponies. One of them a dignified, upstanding unicorn, and the other was a scraggly brown earth pony who really needed a shower. “Are you two familiar with each other?” she asked.

“We’ve met, once,” said Aq, shrugging.

“You’re the bastard who dragged me here!” said the earth pony.

“Right, right, Mr. Walrus?” asked Aq.

“Carpenter!”

Princess regarded him. “You are this pony’s captor?” Aq nodded. Princess turned to Carpenter. “Has he mistreated you in any fashion?”

Carpenter stared at her, not responding.

*Poor thing*, thought Princess, *he must not have understood the question*. “Has Aq mishandled you during your intermittence here?” she asked again, very slowly.

Carpenter stared again for a moment. “What do you *think*?” he asked.

Princess shook her head. “I’m afraid that that is not an adequate answer,” she said.

His mouth made shapes without words for a few seconds, before finally straining a coherent sentence. “What’s your *problem*?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“*No pony talks like that*.” said Carpenter. He seemed to sputter a little. “You talk like some kind of, of...”

“Kind of *what*, earth pony?” asked Aq, his mouth drawn in a snarl.

“Hey, *fuck* you.”

“Oh, how original,” said Aq. “If I had a coin for every time one of you mud-crawlers said that, I’d be one rich unicorn.” He smirked.

“You scumsucking piece of—”

“*Silence!*” said Princess. “*Both* of you!”

Carpenter, however, wasn’t about to stop. He whirled around at her. “What gives you the right to tell me what to do? You swoop in, steal me from my home, and put me on a damn conveyor belt!”

“I understand your concerns,” said Princess, “you have to understand, nothing is pleasant in war—”

“Who are you, anyway?” asked Carpenter. “Is this some kind of joke? Thought you weren’t shit enough, so you decided to come dick around with us some more?”

“I don’t think I like your attitude,” said Aq. “It’s extremely rude.”

“Yes,” said Princess, speaking up. She stepped between the two of them, facing Carpenter. “Your behavior is flatly inexcusable,” she said. “I want you to apologize to Mister Aq right now.”

Carpenter glared at her with a look of seething contempt. And then, almost so fast that Princess couldn’t follow what was happening, he drew back his head and spat in her face.

She shrieked and drew back as Aq leapt forward and swung the blunt end of his rifle across Carpenter’s face.

Princess heard somepony shouting, and then more ponies shouting. It began to overwhelm her, like in the cafeteria. There was shouting. Some clamor, unicorns raising their hooves, earth ponies throwing kicks. She felt herself shrinking, trying to shirk away from the chaos.

“Princess!” said Aq, ducking underneath the swarm of angry earth ponies and baton-wielding unicorns to reach her. “Follow me!”

He took her hoof and led her out, down the hallways, and through a door.

“Are you alright?” asked Aq.

“I.. I think so,” said Princess, nodding. She looked up, and saw that they were not alone in the room. She saw a desk, with two ponies seated. On one side was another earth pony, a thin grey one that she didn’t recognize, and sitting behind the desk was Brother White.

“What’s going on?” asked Brother White.

“Probably a riot,” said the earth pony in a casually detached tone of voice.

Princess shook her head. “Aq, a hoofkerchief, if you please,” she said.

Aq obliged, and Princess began to dust herself off with it.

“Well,” she said, “I do believe I’ve held up my end of our little game.”

“And did you learn anything?” asked White.

Princess peered at him. He seemed expectant.



“Only that the earth ponies here are extremely rude, crude, boorish, impolite, utterly lacking in any manner of courtesy—”

“Those are all synonyms,” said White.

“I should tell you that I am *not* accustomed to having crass remarks about... private parts on my head, or being spat in the face.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” said the earth pony.

White’s face sank a little, as though he were disappointed. “Well then,” he said. “I guess you didn’t.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Princess. “What was I supposed to learn?”

White shrugged. “Maybe you’d stop and wonder *why* they spat at you.”

“I cannot even *begin* to tell you how much this conversation is boring me,” said Aq, cutting in loudly. He eyed the desk. “What are you doing, exactly?”

Princess looked at the desk and took a step forward. There seemed to be a sheet of paper there. No, a diagram of a colossal machine.

“What is this?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s, uh... blueprints,” said White.

“Blueprints,” repeated Aq. “Of...?”

“Of...” White nodded his head and his mouth tucked into a corner. “Theeeee machinery. That you have them working. So...” He looked over at the earth pony. “That he knows what he’s doing.” The earth pony nodded.

“I mean,” the earth pony added, “you don’t even tell us what we’re doing all the time. So Brother White here is just sort of helping us so we can do our jobs better.”

Princess smiled. “Well, that seems like a good job. I will have to give credit where credit is do, Brother Pearly White.”

“Your name is Pearly?” asked the earth pony in a dubious voice.

Aq, however, didn't change his expression. Not for a moment, at least, then his mouth turned to a slight smirk. “So they can do their work better, right?” he asked.

White looked him dead in the face. “Yes,” he said flatly.

“I see...” Aq turned around and took a few paces. Then his rifle floated before him, and he turned around. The earth pony's eyes shot wide as the rifle's barrel bored down at him.

*BANG!*

Princess shrieked. So did Brother White, and it was impossible to tell the two voices apart. The earth pony fell to the floor, gasping as Aq lowered his rifle.

“Duster!” shouted White, jumping to the floor. Duster heaved for breath, bleeding onto the floor.

There was a sound of hoofsteps, and the door behind the desk opened. Brother Shine came charging in.

“What happened?” asked Shine. “I heard a gunsho- *Fuck!*” He shouted.

“Shine, send for a doctor or something!” said White. His horn lit up, and Duster's breathing seemed to ease. “Hold still. Don't move...”

“Look at me, White,” said Aq. White looked up at him.

“I'm not stupid,” he said. “Let me guess what you were *really* doing: sabotage. Is that right?”

White didn't answer, he just looked back down at Duster, while Shine ran out the door.

“I don't think you appreciate just how much we indulge you,” said Aq. “You could stand to be a little grateful. Maybe say *thank you* once in a while.”

“*Shut up!*” snapped White.

“*It's funny!*” barked Aq, making White flinch. “You know, you're not supposed to point a gun at somepony unless you mean to kill them. That kind of wound shot I just did there? I'm not

supposed to do that.” He fondly eyed his rifle. “But you know, I don’t really care.”

“Aq...” said Princess. She’d shrunk back, and her voice was soft. “That wasn’t—”

“With all due respect, Princess,” said Aq, “I would ask you to defer to my position. I’ve dealt with these ponies before.”

Shine came running back into the room. “I don’t know how long they’ll take to get here, but I got bandages.”

“I’ve got him still,” said White. “It’s a little numbing spell I have, just get the—”

“You’re not *listening*, White,” said Aq. White stopped, as Aq pointed the gun at Duster’s head. “Get up, or I actually decide to handle a gun properly.”

White quietly stood up, his eyes locked on him.

“Now, as I was saying,” said Aq, “we’re keeping a close eye on you. You might think you’re being noble by teaching them how to sabotage our machinery. But!” He prodded Duster’s head with the barrel of his rifle, making him giggle slightly. “If we find out that any sabotage *actually* happens, we’ll kill whoever’s responsible. General Monarch might indulge you, but we will not indulge the prisoners.”

“You’re a sociopath,” said Shine, trying to wrap the bandages around Duster’s chest.

“Oh, *please*,” said Aq, rolling his eyes. “Princess had just been able to get a good look at how the earth ponies conduct themselves. I’m sure she would’ve seen more if we hadn’t been there to protect her.”

“What, you expect them to grovel after you bomb their town and steal their family members?” asked Shine.

“Do you know what they do to foals, Princess?” asked Aq. “Pegasus foals?”

White sank into his seat.

“I’ve seen it,” said Aq, before looking back at White. “They mutilate them. They cut their wings off and *burn* the marks on their flanks.” He turned back to Princess. “You should have *seen* the scars.”

White sat in the chair, seemingly despairing. Aq had a hard, stone-faced, almost indignant look. Shine was harder to read. He seemed to be looking at Aq, completely dumbstruck.

Princess's face, meanwhile, had turned to a look of abject disgust. "You..." she looked at White. "These are the ponies you defend? You want me to feel *pity* for these monsters?"

White sighed. "I... I only..." Then, something in his face changed. "Wait. Wait a minute..." He got out of his seat and looked at Aq. "How do *you* know about Clip?"

Aq was silent as White walked up to him.

"I've been looking for him since I got here. The guys running the foal labor have been very tight-mouthed. I couldn't find anything. And every time I asked about it I got more non-answers before you either stuck me in my 'job' or, or something else."

"You've told us plenty about him," said Aq simply. "I just—"

"Don't lie!" Snapped White. "Talking about how *you should've seen the scars*," he continued, his eyes wide. "Like you *know*. Like you've *seen* them."

"Oh, our missionary is a little detective," said Aq, rolling his eyes. "I'm sure if he'd applied himself earlier he might've found him by now."

"***Where is he?!***" shouted White. "***You know where he is! Tell me where he is!***"

"You killed him," Shine said quietly. A hush fell across the room. White slowly turned to face him. "Little pink colt, right?" he asked. "I saw it. Middle of the night, I was out on that fucking terrace, and I saw him, him and some other guy, and they pushed him over the edge."

White slowly turned to face Aq. Aq's face was unchanged.

Princess hadn't had much to say in this conversation thus far. After all, they were talking about things she knew nothing about. But this much, she understood.

"You murdered him," said White in a hushed voice.

"Oops," said Aq.

“You...” she said, looking at Aq. “You *didn't*. You couldn't have done that.”

“I do a lot of things you wouldn't find pleasant, Princess,” said Aq. His voice was softer, speaking to her. “Consider what I did a mercy to the little thing. Can't imagine a pegasus can do much if it can't fly.”

“You...” said White, his voice shaking.

“*You* are going to remember your place,” said Aq, turning back to White. “So I suggest you stop getting ideas and get back in line.” He nodded to Duster, who was still being attended by Shine. “Just like the earth ponies you've been teaching how to sabotage.” He looked back to Princess. “You should get back to your tower. The doorway over there,” he said, nodding to the door behind White's desk, “will lead you away from the workers' area. In the meantime I have to make sure their riot won't have *lasting* damage.”

With that, he turned and left, exiting into the hall they had entered from, just as a unicorn physician entered from behind White's desk. Satisfied that Duster would be attended to, Princess looked back to White, he was still shaking.

“I'm sorry,” she said, “I... I had no idea. If I had known, I'd be...”

But White wasn't answering. His teeth were clenched, and his knees were shaking.

“Brother White?” she asked. “*Pearly?* Are you—”

“*Aq,*” he said.

She was silent.

“*Aq!*” White said again, but this time, he rocketed past Princess, to the door.

“White!” she yelled.

“What are you doing?” called Shine.

“**Aq!**” White shouted, clearing the doorway.

Princess and Shine exchanged a glance. The physician looked up from his patient, from Princess, to Shine, and then said, “Did I miss something?”

“Beats me...” slurred Duster. “I’ve been kinda out of it this entire conversation.”

“This is bad,” said Shine.

Then, Shine and Princess took off through the doorway, back into the hall.

The earth ponies had mostly cleared out. The unicorn guards were brandishing rifles and stun prods, herding them into lines and down the hallways and through doors, back to their quarters, or to work, or perhaps the detention areas. Princess wasn’t completely sure.

White, however, was tearing down the hall.

“Aq!” he screamed, “*get back here!*”

“White, wait!” called Princess, chasing out after him.

They chased him, but he didn’t seem to notice. They followed him around the corner, where Aq was talking with a few other guards and didn’t notice him at first.

“I’m not finished, Aq!” shouted White. This appeared to get Aq’s attention.

“I heard you the first time, White,” said Aq, rolling his eyes dismissively.

White, a rage in his eyes, charged up to him. “You lying, vile, *evil*—” He raised a hoof to strike him, but Aq instantly clocked him over the head with the butt of his rifle.

The other guards started to raise their weapons, but Aq raised a hoof. “Leave him,” he said lazily, watching as White stumbled, nearly falling over, but he held himself up against the wall.

“Stop!” called Princess. “I order you to stop! I am your *Princess*, and you will obey!”

“Understood!” said Aq. White looked over at him. There was a small purple mark on his forehead. “I’m not fighting,” he said. “But if you try to strike me, I will defend myself.”

“*Raagh!*” shouted White, lunging again, but Aq moved out of the way and threw him to the floor.

“What are you trying to do, exactly?” asked Aq. “You’re a missionary. I’m a soldier. You don’t *know* how fighting works. Even if you did, I don’t think you’re body is fit for it.”

“White,” said Shine, “it’s not worth it.”

White slowly got up, his knees shaking, and he looked up at Aq. His eyes were wide and almost red with rage.

“Is that all?” asked Aq, smirking. “Are you going to take the gracious advice of our Princess and fellow missionary? Or do you have more stage combat you’d like to show us.”

White didn’t answer. His horn, however, flashed up in a glow of light. Aq and the other soldiers seemed briefly surprised. One of them let out a quick gasp.

But then, Aq started laughing. “Oh, I *have* to see this. What are you going to do with your magic, White?” he asked. “Brighten my smile?”

The other soldiers joined in, laughing, as Princess and Shine shared a nervous, confused glance. White, however, kept his stare dead on Aq.

“No,” he said in a voice as low as he could manage in his tenor. “I’m going to do *this*.”

Aq looked at him, slightly confused. Then, he raised a hoof to his jaw. “What are you—” But then he stopped. “Ah!” he yelped. “Ah! *Ah!*”

His hitherto regal posture slouched, as he clenched his hoof to his mouth. He began to clench it shut, his yelps of pain coming through his shut mouth.

White stared at him, his teeth gritted like a mad animal, his horn glowing a sickly glow as Aq began to writhe against the wall.

Then, there was a wet *crack!* as Aq screamed.

“*RAAAARGHRHH!*” he howled. His jaw seemed to flop open at a grotesque angle, as he sank against the wall, screaming and writhing like a broken dog.

Princess, Shine, the guards, and a few earth ponies all stared in horror. One of the earth ponies started cheering.

“I can do *so* much with this!” asked White. “You ever been to a dentist? There’s a *reason* they use anesthetics and spells so you don’t feel what they’re doing. I can do whatever I want with

your mouth,” he said, walking over to the hunched body of the broken guard. “I can rip out your teeth, one by one. Or I can press down on them into your gums. Or I can, I can, I can... So...” he laughed sickly. “Yeah. You don’t want to talk about Clip? Then *don’t talk.*”

“White...” said a small voice.

White stopped, and looked around. Then Princess, Shine, and the others all looked to the source.

“White... please stop.”

It was a little pink colt with a blond mane, two scars on his back, and burns on his flanks.

It was Clip. And he looked up at White, sad and confused, with tears in his eyes.

“I forgive him.”