

## Chapter 35

When the flying machines landed, the sky was slowly beginning to brighten as the dawn loomed over the horizon. There were fewer soldiers now than there had been when they took off. That wasn't much of a surprise to any of them. There were also some crates of food, but they were only a small fraction of what General Storm had taken in the first place.

Gunner was stiff, clutching his seat and staring blankly ahead of him. He jumped a little as their vehicle hit the ground with a loud *thud*.

"You okay?" asked Trigger Mark, looking behind him. His voice and face were tired, and he was leaned forward, his shoulders slouched ever so slightly. He looked like someone who really needed to go to bed, but wouldn't be able to sleep if he tried.

"Well..." said Gunner, taking a step off of the gyrocopter. He stumbled; his legs felt like jelly. "I'm not dead." He took a few deep breaths and leaned on a box. "You... owe me a drink... Tomorrow. Or later today. Or... Whenever it is, right now. I don't know."

Trigger Mark hauled himself off of the gyrocopter. "Hopefully we don't have to fly these things again any time soon."

"Yeah..." said Gunner. "Or ever." He sank down against the box. The past few hours were an incomprehensible blur of wind, gunshots, thunder, and shouting. The only thing that he could really remember was the one pegasus he shot, bleeding out into the clouds before falling through. For a moment, nothing going on seemed to register, including the fact that Trigger Mark was saying something.

"Gunner?" asked Trigger Mark.

"Huh?" asked Gunner, who had settled into a relaxed, slumped position.

"You ready?"

"Huh? For what?"

"We need to see Scroll," said Trigger Mark. "Have to finish our job." His voice was tired. In another circumstance, he might've been annoyed at Gunner for making him repeat himself, but right now he just wanted to get everything over with.

“Oh, yeah,” said Gunner, vaguely remembering. “That. Yeah, sure.”

Trigger Mark waited for Gunner to slowly pull himself to his hooves and adjust his rifle. Wordlessly, he led him out of the camp, through the town, and down to the beach. There were a few ponies out, but not many; just the usual early birds for whom four in the morning was their normal waking time. None of them seemed to notice the soldiers. Gunner wondered if they even cared what they had just done. They probably didn't.

He didn't say anything to Trigger Mark as they solemnly made their way to the library on the rock. Trigger Mark noted the windows.

“Curtains up,” he said, pointing. “That means he's hiding something.”

“Uh-huh,” said Gunner, not actually looking where Trigger indicated.

Trigger Mark straightened the gun on his shoulder and approached the door. He raised his hoof and looked at Gunner. “Ready?” he asked.

Gunner shrugged and mumbled something in the affirmative.

Trigger Mark knocked. There was a shuffling sound, a bump, an “ow!”, and the sound of a latch being undone. The door opened a crack, and a groggy eye blinked from behind it.

“Yes?” asked Scroll. “What is it?”

“May we come in?” asked Trigger Mark.

Scroll's bleary eye looked out through the crack. “No,” he said after a pause.

“Scroll, this will go a lot better for all of us if you cooperate,” said Trigger Mark.

“I think I'll pass,” said Scroll. He began to shut the door.

Trigger Mark stuck his hoof in the door and pulled. Scroll pulled back. The door wobbled, but didn't give way in either direction.

“Scroll!” said Trigger Mark, through his teeth. “Think about what you're doing. You're putting everyone on this island in danger.”

“We’re... not... open...” said Scroll.

“No?” asked Trigger Mark. “That’s not like you, Scroll.” He managed to wrest the door just a little way further open. “You and White always had an open-door policy.”

Scroll looked at him with an expression that might have been deadpan were it not for the fact he was focused on trying to keep the door shut. Then he said, “Good point.”

The door effortlessly flung open towards Trigger Mark, who stumbled right back into a do-nothing Gunner. Trigger Mark narrowly avoided tripping over his partner, while Scroll slammed the door shut. As Trigger Mark regained his footing, the latch clicked.

“Scroll!” shouted Trigger Mark, marching up to the door. “Open this door!” He pounded his hoof on it.

Scroll didn’t answer.

“Scroll?” asked Trigger Mark. He stopped and took a deep breath. He spoke again, lowering his voice. “Scroll, listen to me. I don’t know what you’re thinking or what you have going on in there. But I’m telling you, that pegasus is dangerous. It’s a danger to everyone on this island, including you. Even if *he* doesn’t kill you, if the general finds out...”

“What pegasus?” asked Scroll.

“You’re not fooling anyone, Scroll,” said Trigger Mark. “We know you’re hiding one in there, and we’re here to—”

“I’m not listening, you know,” said Scroll. “I’ve got another busy day tomorrow, and it’s like... four in the morning. Goodnight.”

Trigger Mark looked at Gunner, who just looked back at him and shrugged.

“Scroll,” said Trigger Mark, “Scroll, are you there?” There was no response. “I’m giving you one more chance for this to go over with no fuss. Otherwise...” He straightened his shoulders. “I’m going to have to break down this door.”

He waited.

Scroll said nothing.

Then he turned around, lifted his legs, and threw a kick. The door shook with a woody thud. Then another kick, and another thud. Then another kick, and a crack.

The door crashed open, some splinters flying inside, and Trigger Mark marched inside. He saw the front desk, the tables, the bookcase, and Scroll lying on a cot at the end of the room.

“Where is he?” asked Trigger Mark.

Scroll sat up. He looked at Trigger Mark, not saying anything.

“I asked you a question,” said Trigger Mark, stepping into the room. “Where is he?”

Scroll swallowed. “Get out of my library.”

“Not until you tell us where the pegasus is.” He took a deep breath. “Scroll, I’ve been more than reasonable. We...” He waved his hoof, gesturing between the two of them. “We’ve always gotten along.” He looked at Scroll. Scroll just looked back at him, silently. “You know, we stuck our necks out for you two, helping your friend escape.”

“Oh, is that it?” asked Scroll. “What, does it work like coupons? ‘Didn’t use my free murder yesterday, but I’d like to redeem it now’?”

“Scroll, I understand that what we have to do sometimes isn’t pleasant—”

“What you *have* to do?” asked Scroll. He sat up, slowly climbing out of the cot. “You don’t *have* to do anything. You *chose* to come here, to a library run by one lonesome missionary who, who doesn’t have a clue what the fuck he’s doing.” He took a step towards Trigger Mark. “You *chose* to come here, and start making demands, and now you’ve *broken down my door*.” There was a silence. “But I guess I made you do that, ’cause I said no.” He stared down Trigger Mark. “You know that this constitutes an act of aggression against a noncombatant charity group, right? You know what that makes you?”

“Let me guess,” said Trigger Mark, mentally flipping through the kinds of words and terms he’d expect Scroll to use, “an international criminal?”

“No. It just makes you an asshole,” said Scroll. He tilted his head. “Can I ask you a favor? If you want to come here, and break down my door, and interfere in my work, you can do that, but could you not bullshit me about how you’re trying to protect me?”

“Are you done?” asked Trigger Mark. He looked coldly at Scroll. The missionary was in one of his really ‘self-righteous’ moods, it seemed. Normally Trigger Mark expected this from Brother White, and usually directed at someone else. Maybe he needed more sleep, or something to eat.

“Fuck you. You never gave a shit about me or our mission,” said Scroll, now up in his face. “And so you came here hoping to cut someone’s wings off!”

Trigger Mark then found that he had shoved Scroll to the floor. He looked down at him, as Scroll looked up at him, angry and breathing heavily.

“Don’t,” he said to Scroll, “*ever* talk to me that way.”

“Or what?” asked Scroll, getting up and backing towards the bookshelf. “You’ll beat me up? Joke’s on you; I don’t have any glasses left to break!”

“Maybe you could stand to be a little more *gracious*, after everything we’ve done for you,” said Trigger Mark. He took a step forward. “Let me tell you what would happen if I didn’t give a shit. I wouldn’t be asking you nicely to step aside. I wouldn’t be giving you the chance to cooperate. I wouldn’t have given you *time* to think it over. I’d have finished the job before we left, or I’d have reported this to General Quake. I wonder what he would’ve done if he thought you were harboring an enemy combatant, hm?”

Scroll looked back at him, silent but intense.

“So don’t you *dare* talk to me about not giving a shit about your work!” He was silent for a moment as he stared Scroll down. “Gunner, hold him while I search the room.”

Gunner approached Scroll, backing him towards the wall.

“So,” said Scroll, “how’d your little thing go tonight? How many pegasi did you kill?”

Gunner didn’t answer.

“Well?” asked Scroll.

“Just one,” said Gunner, quietly.

Trigger Mark, meanwhile, approached the cot. “I know you’re hiding something, Scroll,” he said. He was making a special effort to keep his voice soft and calm. “Because if you weren’t,

you wouldn't be acting like this. You don't want me in here, so you're getting defensive. That's the first giveaway."

Scroll didn't say anything. He just looked at the soldiers with a look of unbridled scorn.

"I see this a lot," Trigger Mark explained. "If someone has something they shouldn't have, they tend to position themselves as close to the thing as possible. You see, it gives them the feeling that they have it in their control. Like, if they really need to, they can do something to hide it." He looked at Scroll and gave him a little smile. "They don't even know they're doing it."

"Are *you* done?" asked Scroll. He tried to look collected and firm, but a nervous hoof traced the floor.

"When we came in here—"

"*Broke* in," Scroll interrupted.

Trigger Mark ignored him. "You were right on this cot here. And when I walked closer, you got up and moved closer to me, like you were trying to keep me away..." He prodded the sheets, before pulling them up. Then, he took the bedframe and flipped it over into the room. Underneath the cot was a large box. "From this?"

He lifted the lid of the box and found the pegasus sitting there, hunched, and looking up, wide-eyed. There was a pause as all four ponies in the room were in complete silence.

"I'm very disappointed in you, Scroll," said Trigger Mark, not looking away from Eagle.

"The feeling is mutual, asshole," said Scroll. "I knew you were a soldier, but I didn't take you for a thug."

"*You had foals in this room.*" Trigger Mark paused, letting his rough words sink in. "You had an enemy combatant in a room where he could endanger foals, far away from anyone who could protect them. You want to get morally indignant at me for trying to keep this island safe?"

Scroll didn't say anything. Trigger Mark pulled out his pistol.

"Wait..." said Eagle.

"He's just a foal," said Scroll. "He's younger than I am."

Trigger Mark looked down at him. Scroll was right. He was just some colt, looking up at him with terror in his eyes.

“That’s... tragic,” he said, pulling back the hammer on his pistol with his mouth. “But I have to—”

“Isn’t there any room for pity?” asked Scroll. Trigger Mark looked up at him. Scroll’s voice was softer, less accusatory. Now it was more pleading. “You said you cared about us, about our mission. But do you even understand what our mission *is*?”

“You want to befriend him?” asked Trigger Mark. “Are you seriously telling me—”

“Yes,” said Scroll.

“It’s going well...” offered Eagle, weakly raising a hoof.

“And you want me,” said Trigger Mark, still not moving the gun, “to just... walk away. Leave him here.”

“I want you to try our ways, Mark,” said Scroll. “You signed our membership list and you called yourself our friend.” He swallowed and took a breath. “But you never used our ways. What you’re doing... these are Quake’s ways.”

“And if you’re wrong?” asked Trigger Mark. “What if Quake’s ways are necessary, sometimes?”

“If Quake’s ways are the right ways here and now, then this mission has no reason to be here,” said Scroll. “If I’m wrong about this, then this whole island is beyond hope. There’s nothing I can do.”

Trigger Mark took a step away from the pegasus, still keeping his weapon trained on him. He didn’t want to give him a chance to grab his weapon while he looked at Scroll, wondering the meaning of his words.

“Mark, please...” said Scroll.

“Mark?”

Trigger Mark turned his head. Gunner was looking at him, his face sunk, tired, and confused. Mark tilted his head.

“Don’t do it, Mark,” said Gunner.

“Gunner...” said Trigger Mark.

“He didn’t hurt any of the kids,” said Gunner. His voice was soft, barely above a mumble. “He isn’t really doing anything here. At all.”

Trigger Mark looked back at Eagle, the pistol still pointed at his head.

“Hasn’t there been enough tonight?” asked Gunner. “Do we need another?”

Trigger Mark gave Eagle one more look, studying him, before stepping over to Scroll. “Do you *swear* that you have him under control?”

Scroll looked at him, staring wordlessly.

“Do you?” asked Trigger Mark, more firmly.

Scroll took a deep breath. “Yes. I think so.”

“You *think*?” asked Trigger Mark.

“Yes,” answered Scroll.

Trigger Mark released the hammer on his pistol, holstering it. “Fine. If the pegasus—”

“Eagle,” said Scroll.

“The... excuse me?” asked Trigger Mark.

“His name is Eagle. I want you to call him by his name.” Scroll looked back up at Trigger Mark. “Not ‘the pegasus’.”

Trigger Mark took a breath. “If *Eagle* doesn’t cause any trouble, he can stay here, and we won’t tell the general or anypony else about this. But if word gets out, and Quake decides he doesn’t like it...” He leaned down into Scroll’s face. “I’m not going to help you this time. Are we clear?”



“Yes,” said Scroll, nodding.

Trigger Mark stepped away, towards the now busted doorway. “Come on, Gunner,” he said, walking out. Then he paused, before turning back. Scroll had gone to the overturned cot and was starting to turn it back over. Gunner, however, just stood where he was by the bookcase. “Gunner?”

Gunner slowly turned back to him. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “I’m coming.”

Trigger Mark began the march back to the town, with Gunner trailing behind him, stopping every so often to look back at the library on the rock with the broken door.

---

“This isn’t happening,” said Brother White.

Clip sat on a stool, wires and diodes stuck all over his body. A large metal hat sat on his head, covering his eyes. Around him was an assortment of massive machines, blinking with multi-colored lightbulbs. Bleeping and blipping and blooping.

“I can’t see anything,” said Clip.

“That’s okay,” said Bright Idea, quickly hopping from one station to the next. She paused at a graph that was scribbling lines all over a continuously emerging sheet of paper. “We just need to collect the data.”

“And... what data are you collecting?” asked White.

“I’ll tell you once I’ve collected it!” said Bright Idea. “And once we run some tests...”

White looked back at Clip. “Tests?” he asked. “No. Your... your ‘he can’t die’ thing is...” He shook his head. “You’re not going to *test* that.”

Bright Idea looked at him, her face long and blank. “Not going to test? But then we won’t know if it’s true or not!”

White stared at her. “Yeah, we’re done here,” he said, turning to Clip. “Come on, let’s get this stuff off of you.”

“Wait!” shouted Bright Idea, throwing herself between the two. “You don’t know what you’re doing!”

White stopped and tilted his head. “That... would make two of us.” He tried to smile gently. “Look, I know that you think you might have stumbled onto some sort of... big discovery with Clip here. But... I think you’re kind of mistaken. I don’t think he’s got any... special magical property or anything. He’s just a pegasus foal.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t study him!” said Bright Idea, rushing to one of the blooping stations. “I don’t get to see pegasi very often, *let alone* one that doesn’t have a gun pointed at me!” She turned around, smiling exuberantly. “It’s a golden opportunity!”

White heard himself let out a groan. “We studied the pony body in high school. They have hollow bones. They have high metabolisms. They can touch clouds like solids. You’re not really discovering anything groundbreaking.”

“Or cloudbreaking!” said Clip.

“Oh, nonsense,” said Bright Idea, turning back to a stack of papers on her desk. “This is *much* more interesting than the other things I’ve had to work on. Most of the things the general has me work on are so boring. I’m just glad he got over losing the Cannon Engine as quickly as I got over working on it. It’s like everyone ran out of ideas after the Plague of Nightmares.”

It was at this point that, for White, the conversation had shifted from ‘kind of creepy’ to ‘genuinely disturbing,’ and he was now disconnecting Clip from the contraptions attached to him.

“Tell you what,” said White, “I’m going to take Clip away from here so that he doesn’t get hurt in your experiments, and when I get home I’ll come back and give you some of my high school biology texts.”

Clip was now perched on White’s back, and the two were ready to make their way out, when Bright Idea turned around on them. Whether or not she noticed that they were trying to abscond was not clear. “Hold that thought for just a moment,” she said, turning to Clip. “Swallow.”

“Huh?” asked Clip. “wha-mmpf!” he said, as she shoved something small in his mouth.

“What—” started White, but Bright Idea held a hoof up to his mouth.

“Juuuust a minute,” said Bright Idea in hushed tones. “Give him some time...”

“Wow...” said Clip, his eyes wide. A giant grin slowly crept onto his face. “I can feel my wings again!” he said, his voice full of wonder. He sat up on his haunches, almost leaning into the air. White looked at him and could almost see the phantom wings outstretched.

White turned on Bright Idea with a furious expression. “What did you *do*?”

“Sharphorn,” said Bright Idea. “It’s an enhancement drug we’re developing. Tests so far show it works very well on unicorns. Sharpens their minds and helps them concentrate, along with an increased sensitivity to sensory stimuli.”

“Do your horns get in the way of wearing hats?” asked Clip, inquisitively narrowing his eyes as he looked from White’s horn to Bright Idea’s.

“Interestingly, it seems to affect him faster than unicorns,” said Bright Idea, circling Clip like a housecat. “Perhaps it owes to an increased metabolism...”

“That means I eat a lot!” said Clip, almost bouncing out of his seat at the sound of a conversation topic he recognized.

“I already *told* you that!” said White.

“I like grilled cheese sandwiches...”

“It wasn’t something I was learning, so I didn’t listen,” said Bright Idea, turning around. She went back to her desk, which was strewn with all manner of doohickeys and thingmebobs, and started shuffling around. “Now where did I put that notepad...” she muttered. “Ah!” She said, lifting a tiny pad of papers from the pile. “Found it!”

But when she turned around, White and Clip were gone. All that remained were the faint sounds of hoofsteps and a colt’s voice saying, “So I was just thinking, that at your and Scroll’s wedding, I could carry the rings...”

---

Scroll didn’t look very good. Due to the night’s interruptions he hadn’t gotten very much sleep, nor had he much of a chance or means to groom himself.

Eagle sat in his box. He hadn't moved from there last night, and he just sat there. Eagle watched Scroll as the missionary checked the door. No pony was likely to come. Few ponies on the island, it seemed, had much interest in Scroll's books right now.

Scroll shut the door as best as he could, given that he'd had to feebly prop what was left of it up after Trigger Mark had kicked it in, and walked back, sitting at one of the many unused tables.

"I..." Eagle started, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Hm?" asked Scroll.

"I, uh..." Eagle said. "I just wanted to say... I don't really know how to say it..." He was silent for a moment. "I didn't think you would do that for me. I thought I was dead. I guess, well..."

"Is that a thanks?" Scroll asked, a tired wryness in his tone and smile.

"I guess..." said Eagle.

Scroll pulled a chair up to his box and sat down, regarding him. Without a gun or a way to murder someone he seemed so... deflated. A change he certainly preferred to the sadistic attempts on his life, of course.

"Well," said Scroll, "you're welcome. You've been very..." His mouth twinged as he looked for the right word. "Well... cooperative?" He laughed a little nervously.

Eagle sat up a little, regarding him with a suspicious, slightly weirded-out look. "Well... I don't really have a whole lot of other options..."

"Well, heh... That's actually something I wanted to talk about."

"What? What are you talking about?"

Scroll got up and walked away, towards the bookshelf. "Your, well... attitude, I think, has been improving. Which is my way of saying that you don't seem to be trying to kill me. And you haven't been acting like you're trying to, well, attempt that and..." He shook his head. "I'm really sorry, I'm not good at this. Let me start over." He cleared his throat.

Eagle sighed and propped his cheek up with a hoof.

“What I think I want to ask,” said Scroll, taking a book from the shelf and walking back towards Eagle. “Is are you just doing... playing along with this for your own safety? Or are you taking this to heart?” He set the book down on the edge of the box.

Eagle looked blankly at it. “What is it?”

“It’s the *Book of Friendship*,” said Scroll. “The teachings of Twilight Sparkle and our Fraternity.”

“Oh,” said Eagle. “That’s... that’s the thing that Sky was talking about.” He looked at the book curiously. “He didn’t actually have it on him.”

“Guess he didn’t have time to pack,” said Scroll. “Quake doesn’t always give the biggest head starts when he, well...”

“He’s fucking terrifying,” said Eagle. “I’ve seen him rip apart pegasi like, like paper.”

“Believe me, I’ve seen it. White... had to run away, too. I think the same thing happened to Brother Shine.” Scroll paused for a moment, looking down at the book. “It... Well, you probably don’t need me to tell you it hasn’t been easy. And this isn’t about me.”

“Uhh...”

“Eagle, I’d like you to join our fraternity.”

Eagle blinked. “Excuse me?”

Suddenly a knock came at the door. Scroll and Eagle tensed and fell completely silent. Eagle sank into the box, shutting the lid over his head.

“Scroll?” asked a voice from outside. It was Barrel’s.

Scroll let out a relieved sigh. “Yeah?”

“You in there?” asked Barrel. After a brief pause, he appended, “I mean, can I come in?”

“Sure!” said Scroll. As he took a step forward, however, Eagle cracked the lid of the box open and grabbed his leg.

“What are you doing?” Eagle whispered in a frantic rasp.

“Barrel’s a friend. He won’t hurt you,” reassured Scroll, gently pulling his leg away and approaching the door. He undid the latch and opened it. He saw Barrel, standing there with a saddlebag. “Barrel!” he said, smiling. “It’s... it’s been a while.” He leaned over. “I, uh, haven’t seen you out of the tavern since, well...”

“Yeah, I’ve missed it,” said Barrel, nodding. “But I’m getting better. I don’t need the bandages any more.” He paused for a moment. “Still kind of sore, though.” His mouth twinged a little. “But it could be worse. I could be dead.” He laughed awkwardly. “Well, anyway... It’s nice to be out. I’ve gotten to say hi to the seagulls for the first time in a while.”

“Would you like to come in?” asked Scroll, as he stepped to the side and held the door open.

Barrel stepped in, awkwardly stopping in the doorway to stick his head into his saddlebag. “Hold on a minnit...” he said, before pulling a bottle out with his teeth. He smiled. “Eh? ‘ought a ‘ottle o’ ‘iher!”

“Oh!” said Scroll, watching as Barrel made his way to the table. “Sure, come right in. Is Tap, uh...”

“Oh, she’s busy,” said Barrel. “Lot of soldiers there that want some ‘happy-to-be-alive’ sex.” He paused for a moment. “I figured nopony would notice if I slipped out for a while.” He set the bottle on the table and looked over at the box. Eagle watched him, wide-eyed, the top of his head poking out from the edge. “Hello.”

“Barrel, this is Eagle,” said Scroll. “He, uh...”

“Ohhhhh, right, the guy who tried to brutally kill you twice!” said Barrel.

Eagle shifted uncomfortable and muttered something.

“Barrel, that might not be the... most sensitive thing to bring up,” said Scroll.

“I said I was sorry...” muttered Eagle.

“Oh, sorry... Well, scoot the box over here,” said Barrel, taking the cork out of the bottle and setting out four glasses. “I thought it’d be nice to have a little get together here. Just the four of us.”

Scroll tilted his head. “The four of...”

“I didn’t think you’d mind if I invited Gwynna,” said Barrel.

There was a cry from outside the doorway. The ponies looked over and saw a seagull standing and peering a gap. Barrel’s face lit up in a smile. “Glad you could join us!” he said.

The seagull hopped through the opening and onto the table as Scroll slid Eagle over in his box. Barrel poured out some cider into each of the four glasses before taking a seat himself. As he did this, he admired Eagle’s box.

“That’s a nice box,” said Barrel, “where’d you get it?”

“I, uh...” said Scroll. “I asked Buzz for a favor.” He went silent for a moment. “He seems to be doing okay.”

Barrel made a face.

“I’m going to have to visit him. Once I... get a hold on myself.” He leaned over the table, looking down at his glass.

“Well, maybe I can help!” said Barrel. As Scroll looked up, he continued, “I mean, I was thinking that, well, with White being gone, you could use a helping hoof with the mission stuff and... stuff.”

“Barrel, I don’t know if that’s, um...” Scroll hemmed and hawwed. “Does your sister... *know* that you’re here?”

“No,” said Barrel.

“Are you sure this is uh, well, are you sure this is a good idea?” asked Scroll. “I mean, well, Tap did say she didn’t want, well...”

“I want to spend some time here,” said Barrel. “Away from all those jerks at the bar. Besides...” He took a sip of cider. “I thought you could use some friendly company.” He looked at Eagle. “No offense.”

“Uhh...” said Eagle, looking at Barrel as though he were afraid of some sort of violent reprisal.

“So you’re Eagle?” asked Barrel.

“*Mrap?*” piped Gwynna.

“No, Eagle, not Seagull,” Barrel corrected.

“*Kra,*” went Gwynna.

Scroll took a sip of cider. “Thank you,” said Scroll. “It’s been a little hard since White...”

“Hey, I’m sure he’s fine,” said Barrel. “It’s not like the unicorns are going to try to kill him for being a unicorn, right?” He smiled in an attempt to comfort. “Hard times all around. Eagle’s probably scared for his life right now, I’m recovering from a bullet wound, and Gwynna’s in a custody battle with the ex-wife.”

Gwynna made a squawking sound.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out between the two of you. It’s... really not your fault. You did everything you could to try to repair your marriage.” He shrugged. “I guess sometimes you can only go so far if she’s not willing to meet you on it.”

Scroll looked down at his cup, his shoulders sagging as he felt a small pit in his stomach.

“So... how are things over here?” asked Barrel.

“About as good as it looks,” Eagle mumbled. He just looked down at his cup. He hadn’t even taken a sip.

“Have any events planned?” asked Barrel.

“Huh?” asked Scroll. “Ev— oh... Well, no, I guess... Those were always White’s ideas. I’m... just trying to keep everything from falling down on top of me.”

“Sounds like you could use some help,” said Barrel.

“Huh?” asked Scroll. “Oh, no. I couldn’t ask you to—”

“You’re not asking me,” said Barrel. “I’m volunteering. I mean, that’s what it meant when I joined, didn’t it?”



“*Skwa!*” went Gwynna.

“I...” said Scroll.

“Wasn’t that something you taught me, once? Not to be afraid to accept help?” asked Barrel.

“Yes...” said Scroll. “Yes, that, that’s true.” He looked up at Barrel and thought about what Tap said, about how she didn’t want them to rope Barrel into their zany schemes. But then he thought... “Well, I’m not one to turn down a friendly face.”

Barrel’s expression lit up. “Great! So, what do we do?”

“Well,” said Scroll. “It’s... complicated. I don’t know where to start.”

“Apart from the part where I’m pretty much fucking dead if I get found out,” deadpanned Eagle, “apart from that it shouldn’t be too complicated.”

“I have two ideas,” said Barrel.

Scroll looked at him and leaned forward. “Oh?”

“Well, the first is you could have Eagle join the Fraternity.”

“Did you set this up?” asked Eagle to Scroll. “Like, you invited your friend over to make your pitch?”

“No,” said Barrel, not skipping a beat, “but, like, if you joined, you could be out and walking around. You could pass yourself off as a new missionary and nopony would be the wiser. And you could help Scroll with his work.”

“Wait, I’d have to pretend to be someone from Equestria?” asked Eagle. “But I don’t know anything about it!”

“So?” asked Barrel.

“Neither does anyone else on this island...” said Scroll, stroking his chin thoughtfully. “But it might be difficult to convince Quake. I’d have to spin a few things in order for him not to

suspect. I mean, he'd wonder why he didn't know about this in advance. I guess I could forge a letter, but..."

"Hm..." said Barrel. "Well, I dunno, we can think on that some more. The second idea is, well, we move you to a different hiding spot. Like, we've got a cellar you could hide in."

"But that'd mean we'd have to haul him through town," said Scroll. "At best we'd be hauling a large box into the tavern. Ponies would notice."

"Well, maybe we don't even need to go through town," said Barrel. "There are a ton of abandoned shacks and stuff in the forest. We could hide him in one of those. Though, uh... Visiting might be difficult to explain and someone might stumble and..." He paused, staring blankly ahead. "Shit. Nevermind, that... That's not a good idea."

"Great," said Eagle. "Great, great. Good to know I'm still dead."

"Eagle, be nice," said Scroll.

Eagle laughed. "Be *nice*? I'm crippled and I'm one screw-up away from being fucking dead! Hell, I could be dead without doing anything if your soldier friends decide to rat us out."

"I'm trying to *help!*" said Scroll.

"Guys, guys!" said Barrel. "Okay, maybe these ideas aren't perfect, but we can think of something."

"*Mrm mrm mrm mrm,*" said Gwynna.

Barrel looked at her.

"*Mrm mrm,*" she said.

"What did she say?" asked Scroll.

"Now we're asking the bird," said Eagle. "I'm going back to my box." He lowered himself down and shut the lid.

"She's asking how long it will take for Eagle's wings to heal," said Barrel.

There was a pause, and Eagle opened the lid of the box, peeking out.

“Hard to say for certain,” said Scroll, nodding his head from side to side. “Broken wings... could be a couple of weeks.”

“Well, what if he flies to Equestria after he heals?” asked Barrel.

Everyone was silent, thinking to themselves. Gwynna dipped her beak into her cup of cider.

“He could tell the Fraternity what’s going on,” mused Scroll. “We could get help.”

“Uhh, I’m not the smartest pony in this room,” said Eagle. “But I don’t think I’ll be able to fly all the way from here to Equestria.”

“Oh,” said Barrel. “You can’t?”

“I’m wearing a cast,” said Eagle, shifting so that his bound wings were more visible. “You know... something that takes time.”

“Oh yeah...” said Barrel, now stumped.

“Wait,” said Scroll. For the first time in a while, a cheeky, satisfied grin started to crawl across his face. “Maybe he won’t have to.”

---

It was about an hour later when Clip came down from his high. He seemed to crash completely and went straight to taking a nap. White set him down on his pillow before sitting down next to him on the bed.

*Crazy mare puts Celestia-knows-what into him*, he thought, looking down at Clip. Thankfully, the colt seemed to be happily sleeping, but White was still worried.

He worried a lot lately. He worried if Scroll was safe. He worried about Tap, and Barrel, and Buzz. He had no way of knowing anything outside of the floating castle. And as things had turned out, it seemed he couldn’t trust what he thought he knew of what was going on *inside* the floating castle.

It seemed his only real ally was Brother Shine, who was in a lot of self-pitying lethargy. Then White realized that *he* was falling into the same state.

*What am I going to do?*

“Mm...” murmured Clip.

White looked over at him and saw him yawning, raising his head and blinking slowly.

“Woah...” said Clip. “My head felt funny.”

“You okay?” asked White.

Clip sat up and stretched his mouth open wide, giving a long yawn. He blinked and shook his head. “Yeah, I think so.” He looked around, before sinking back into the red velvet covers.

“Ohhhh... these are sooooo comfy...” he said, letting out a contented hum. “Like... the total best.”

White chuckled.

At length, Clip pulled himself up with a great deal of effort. “So, what are we gonna do?” he asked, propping himself up against one of the large plush pillows.

“What?”

“I mean, we’re back together,” said Clip. “We can do something.”

“Well, I don’t...”

“We should build a boat!”

White paused, wondering for a second if the drug was still doing something to Clip’s head. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I know what you mean.”

“You know,” said Clip. He sat up on his haunches and traced a shape in the air with his hooves. “A boat. I was...” He stopped and looked around, as if looking for someone who was listening in. He leaned forward and gestured for White to lower his head to his mouth. He whispered in White’s ear, “I was talking with Carpenter about it. We’re gonna build a boat and get the earth ponies off of here.”

White paused. It sounded like a crazy idea.

“I mean, we can make a raft or a boat, get some ponies on it, get down to the water...” said Clip. “We could do it at night, when no pony’s looking. The castle moves, so by the time any pony notices they’re gone, they could be far away.” He looked up at White. His expression, ever hopeful, seemed to falter just a little. “White... White, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, Clip. I just don’t know what to do.”

“Are you going to give up?” asked Clip, scooting up next to him and prodding his side.

“Well...” said White. He looked away from Clip. He couldn’t take those probing eyes. Everything about the boat idea sounded like there were a hundred ways it could go wrong... He thought about Duster, who’d been shot, and who could still die for all White knew.

“You have to do *something*,” said Clip.

“I will, Clip,” said White, putting his hoof on Clip’s shoulder. “I will. I just... I don’t know about boats. I don’t know if that’s something that can work.”

Clip seemed deflated. “Something has to work...”

“I know, Clip,” said White.

---

Brother Scroll walked back to town with a newfound purpose. He had to find Trigger Mark and talk to him. Unfortunately, he didn’t really know where to look. He could check Quake’s camp, but he would rather not put himself close to him unless he absolutely had to.

He made his way to Tap’s tavern. He didn’t have any real way of knowing if Trigger Mark would be there, but some soldiers might be there, and someone there might be able to tell him.

Or at least he could talk to Tap and see if his idea wasn’t completely stupid. She’d probably think it was.

The snow had finally been all cleared out of town by now. He wondered if Tap would be annoyed that this would cut into her water sales. *Serves her right*, thought a small voice in his head. Then, ashamed that he’d think something spiteful like that, Scroll shook his head, trying to put his mind to what he had to do.

The tavern, as it turned out, wasn't particularly busy. There was the usual crowd of earth ponies there for their relaxation after work, but no throng of soldiers.

He looked around and saw Barrel at the counter, who waved to him. Tap, however, was nowhere to be seen. Scanning the room, however, he did see Trigger Mark seated at a corner booth.

*Lucky me...* thought Scroll, as he began to approach. He thought of what he meant to ask as he approached, knowing what he wanted, but not exactly how to word it. "Hello!" he said nervously, stepping over to his table. "Mind if I sit down?"

Trigger Mark looked up at him. "I suppose not," he said, eyeing Scroll suspiciously as he sat down. "So."

"So!" said Scroll, leaning over the table. "Iiiiiiiii might need, uh... a little favor."

"No, Scroll."

"Trigger Mark, just listen—"

"Scroll, I'm not sticking my neck out on the line for some scheme you've got hatched," said Trigger Mark. "You have a history—"

"No, *some* of my ideas do work," said Scroll. "And even when White and I had a plan that didn't work out, it was at least worth trying."

Trigger Mark sighed.

"Trigger Mark, this will make us both happy."

"Fine," said Trigger Mark. "I'm listening."

"I want to get him off of the island."

"What?" asked Trigger Mark, looking up sharply. "What, so he can go back to Storm?"

"No-no-no-no!" said Scroll. "I'm sending him to Equestria."

Trigger Mark regarded him with a suspicious curiosity, before he leaned back in his seat, folding his forelegs. "Okay. How?"

Scroll took a deep breath and leaned forward, motioning for Trigger Mark to incline his ear.

“We get a cloud,” Scroll whispered. Then he leaned back, a pleased grin on his face.

Trigger Mark looked at him, slowly sat up, and asked, “Excuse me?”

“A cloud,” said Scroll. “Once his wings are strong enough he can ship out on it like a raft.”

“How are you going to get a cloud?” asked Trigger Mark.

“Okay, okay...” said Scroll. “So, what I’m thinking is I can write to the Fraternity, tell them that because the earth ponies out here don’t really know pegasi too well...”

“I think we know pegasi well enough.”

“Uh-uh-uh!” said Scroll, raising a hoof as one of his ‘I’m so smart’ expressions lighting up on his face. “That’s the racism talking—I can send for some teaching materials. Now, I’m thinking that the Fraternity could send a small cloud.”

“Okay,” said Trigger Mark, downing his drink. “So what’s the part you want my help with?”

“The part where Quake thinks that this is stupid,” said Scroll. “If he mentions that, maybe you could suggest, I dunno, that learning about clouds and the pegasi magic will help in fighting them or something.”

Trigger Mark looked up at the ceiling and took a deep breath.

“Mark, this gets Eagle off of the island without hurting anyone.”

“Okay,” said Trigger Mark. “I’ll help you with this. If Quake starts asking questions, I’ll vouch.” He leaned forward into his drink. “I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

“So do I...” Scroll muttered. He looked up and saw as the door to the cellar opened. Tap came in, balancing some bottles of beer on her back.

She seemed to notice him immediately. “Well, what are we doing here?” she asked, approaching the table. “Didn’t expect to see you out here. Thought you’d be busy. Unless you’re talking business.”

“Something like that,” said Trigger Mark, finishing his drink. “I’ll back you on this, Scroll. You’d better know what you’re doing. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be on my way.”

“Don’t forget to pay,” said Tap.

Trigger Mark placed some coins on the table and left the bar.

Tap took his place at the table. “Well, how goes things with your surprise guest?”

“Okay,” said Scroll, shrugging. “You know, I’m one dumb step away from dying horribly, but apart from that?”

Tap chuckled. “Is that what you were talking about with Trigger Mark?”

“Yeah,” said Scroll. He took a deep breath and leaned over the table, rubbing his temple with a hoof. “I *think* I have a solution, but... it’s a bit of a longshot.”

“So what is it? Refit the giant trampoline to launch him off the island? Build a submarine out of spare cookingware?” she asked

“Something like that,” said Scroll, shrugging.

Tap leaned in. “I know Barrel stopped by earlier.”

“You do?” asked Scroll. He sat up, a little surprised. “You’re not... mad?”

“No, I guess not,” she said. “I guess...” She sighed. “You know, you and White were the first real friends he ever had. I think that means something. I know that... I still get scared, thinking of how he got shot.” She paused. “But I can’t always protect him, and I think I have to realize that. Sometimes you just have to trust someone, I guess.”

“I won’t put him in someplace he might be in danger,” said Scroll quickly. “I want everything to be as safe as possible.”

“I know,” she said, nodding slowly. “And I appreciate that. I think... blaming you for him getting shot wasn’t fair.”

“It’s okay,” said Scroll. “You acted like that because you care about him.” He laughed.



“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, I was just thinking about Carpenter and how that’s kind of why he tried to, well…” His voice trailed off and the smile fell from his face. “Sorry, bad example.”

Tap laughed.

“I need to see Buzz,” said Scroll, getting up from his chair. “See how he’s doing.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Tap. She turned to the counter. “Think you can handle it while I go on an errand with Scroll?” she asked.

Barrel nodded happily, while Gwynna squawked.

“He says she needs a place to stay,” muttered Tap to Scroll. “Something about a divorce.”

“I heard,” said Scroll.

The two of them made their way out of the tavern, into the streets. The day was ending, and the sun was falling. The first stars of the evening began to peek through the sky, twinkling down.

“I never get used to it here,” said Scroll, looking up. “No clouds. Every night the sky is just *full* of stars. It just… feels oddly peaceful and big.”

“Clouds in the sky all the time?” asked Tap. “Maybe it’s best I don’t take that offer of yours. I’d get paranoid and lose my shit.”

“Eheh,” Scroll chuckled.

“So what are you doing out here?” asked Tap.

“Well, I thought I should pay Buzz a visit,” said Scroll. “I’m worried about him. I mean, I don’t know what I’d do if it happened to me.”

“They way you used to hang on to White it looks to me like it did,” said Tap.

Scroll slowed down and stopped. “Well, I guess you’re right,” he said. He laughed a little. “Well, how do I look like I’ve been holding up.”

Tap laughed. "You could be doing a lot worse. I mean, you could've had a complete meltdown and sat on your bed sucking your hoof."

"Well if that's the standard," said Scroll dryly. "Flying colours." He stopped for a moment. "I knew a girl in high school named Flying Colours. Top athlete in the school."

"Pegasus?" Tap asked.

"Yeah. And she idolized Rainbow Dash. I... don't remember if that was actually her name, or if she just decided to call herself that to be like her hero."

"She's one of your heroes too, isn't she?" asked Tap. "Her and the others?"

Scroll nodded. "Well, yes..."

"Maybe I should re-read the books. It was fun to read about their adventures," she said. "Do you have other heroes? Aside from them?"

"Well..." Scroll paused. "In real life? It's not something I ever really thought about. I always sort of kept to myself, not really thinking about other ponies. Not before joining the Fraternity." He chewed on the thought some more. "I know White's personal hero is Top Banana."

"That sounds familiar."

"He went to our high school. He's also with the Fraternity. Apparently his missions have been big successes."

"Missions?" asked Tap. "Like, more than one? You do that? I thought you only went on one."

"Well... we're supposed to do one," said Scroll. "Ponies can volunteer for more. I dunno, I'll think about that more once this one's over."

Tap chuckled.

The snow was gone, but the ground was still cold to walk on. Scroll's hooves felt nippy, but at least they didn't feel wet. *Always look on the bright side, eh?* he thought, giggling a little to himself. That's what White would say.

They walked up to Carpenter's old shop. It looked like a carpenter's shop, a nondescript, simple wooden building. It looked cozy and humble, like the house of someone who didn't take visitors a whole lot. On the door was a wooden plank with "CLOSED, go a way" scribbled hastily on it in what looked like black charcoal.

Scroll gave Tap an erstwhile glance before knocking on the door.

"Go away..." grumbled Buzz's voice from inside.

"It's me, Scroll," said Scroll.

There was a pause, before the door opened. Buzz peeked out, looking worn out. "What do you want?" he sighed.

"Just felt like checking in," said Scroll. "Seeing how you're holding up and all that."

"Okay, I guess," said Buzz, opening the door. He stepped aside and let them walk in.

Scroll looked around. There was very little room to walk around—only a path from the door to the desk behind the counter. Everything else was covered in chairs and tables and small cabinets and doors.

"It's been busy..." said Buzz, walking back to the desk. "But I got money. So... I make stools." He made a grand, sweeping gesture over the contents of his shop; or as grand a sweeping gesture as a colt could make. "So many fucking stools..."

He didn't look directly at Scroll or Tap. Maybe it was guilt. Maybe he didn't want to talk to Scroll. Maybe he was just tired.

*Aren't we all tired*, Scroll thought. "If there's ever anything you need, you can always come by the library," he said.

"Yeah, it'd be nice if you had something I could use," said Buzz.

"Touche..." said Scroll. "Well... anyway, thanks for the box. You have no idea how much I needed that."

"Well, hey, I'm pretty good at boxes," said Buzz.

“Scroll could probably use a new door,” said Tap. “His got knocked in.”

Buzz looked up. “Huh?”

Scroll started. “What? N-no. I don’t, I couldn’t ask—”

“Hey, just saying,” said Tap.

“I can’t pay for that,” said Scroll. “I’m not, uh, I’m not the one who should be asking favors.”

“I’ll pay for it,” said Tap.

Scroll looked at her, surprised. “What?”

“Well…” Tap said, tilting her head from side to side, weighing the thought. “We’ll see if I can afford it. I should have enough spare change for a little favor. Unless you’d just keep a busted door.”

“Well…”

Tap chuckled. She looked over to Buzz, who was slouched against the back of his oversized seat, looking at them as though waiting for a confirmation on what was going to happen. She approached him. “Look, I’ve been there. I know what it’s like to lose your family and feel like you’re on your own. It feels heavy.” She smiled warmly and looked back at Scroll. “I’ve held up. You two are holding up.”

“Well, that’s good to hear,” said Scroll.

“We can help each other,” said Tap. “I mean, didn’t you tell me it’s okay to get help from friends?”

Scroll smiled. “Well, the book did.”

Tap shrugged. “Well, same thing, really.”

By the time Scroll and Tap left the shop, Scroll wasn’t completely convinced he could accept the offer of help. Still, he was glad he was able to visit and glad that Tap was there with him.

“Thanks for the help there,” said Scroll. “I was worried I didn’t have enough to say.”

“Well, that’s just something I’m better at than you are,” said Tap, giving a toss of her mane.

They stepped out into the street, beginning to make their way back to the tavern, when they heard a voice.

“Scroll?”

They turned. They saw Gunner standing there. He had deep bags under his eyes, and he took slow, heavy steps towards them.

“G... Gunner?” asked Scroll.

“I wanted to talk to you about something,” said Gunner. He walked with a slouch, and his steps were slow, heavy, and tentative. He almost seemed to sway from side to side. “I’ve been thinking. I didn’t get any sleep after we left.”

“I, uh, well...” Scroll said, looking at Tap. She shrugged, before he looked back at Gunner. “Well, you kind of caught me by surprise.”

“It’s important,” said Gunner. His face fell, if that were even possible. “Please...”

Scroll watched him. Like with Buzz, he was at a bit of a loss for words. “Yes?” was all he could say.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Gunner. His face gazed down, just below their eye level. It almost seemed like he wasn’t looking at them at all. “About... what happened at the library. About last night. About last night. And about White and what happened and why that...” His voice trailed off. He couldn’t finish the sentence.

“About why...?” said Scroll. He watched the strange, disoriented soldier before him. He wasn’t sure whether he should approach him or keep his distance. Gunner, however, took the initiative and took a step forward.

“It, it happened because of what I did. I shot that cannon and it hit the tower. And then that unicorn ended up on the shore, and then when Quake came... White stood there in front of them to keep him from that unicorn. And then Quake tried to kill him, and he had to run away. And I just think. If I hadn’t shot that cannon, that unicorn wouldn’t have been on the shore. And then White wouldn’t have put himself between him and Quake. And then White would still be here.”

Scroll looked again at Tap, before looking back at Gunner. “Is... is that why you’re upset? Because you feel guilty about it? I mean, uh...” He coughed and cleared his throat. “I understand, but it’s not like you could have known—”

“But it’s not about knowing, is it?” asked Gunner. He gave a pained smile. “I mean, it’s not about, about predicting the future. It’s just... It happened because White did the right thing. And he did that because I did the wrong thing.”

Scroll opened his mouth to say something, but Gunner desperately spoke over him.

“And I didn’t just do the wrong thing there, I’ve done the wrong thing, I’ve been... Scroll, I don’t like who I am.”

Scroll balked. He didn’t know how to respond to that. Thankfully for him, he didn’t have to.

“I, I’ve hurt a lot of ponies,” Gunner continued. “And usually I can justify it, like, they’re trying to hurt us. I have to. But then, then last night...” He said. “I saw... Oh, fuck. I, I can’t be right. If I’m right, if that was right, then...”

“Scroll?” asked Tap, leaning into him. “Aren’t you going to say something?”

Scroll cleared his throat. “Well...” he said. “Do you... do you want to give our ways a chance?”

Gunner nodded. He took a step forward. He seemed shorter now than he usually did. “I want to do the right thing,” he said. “I don’t want to be this... this thing I am now.”

“You’re not a bad pony, Gunner,” said Scroll.

“But I’m not a good one,” said Gunner. He knelt at Scroll’s hooves. “Please,” he said. “Help me.”

Scroll smiled and put a hoof on Gunner’s shoulder.

And Tap looked at him and saw something. Somehow, for the first time in his life, Scroll seemed powerful. The image in front of her; the kneeling soldier, the missionary with the gentle smile. She had never seen that from Scroll. Somehow she had imagined she could see White do that, but Scroll? That had never crossed her mind. The slowly dawning shock filled her with the slightest sense of awe, and the twinge of fear that comes with that.

And she thought, if only for a second, that maybe, if he had this kind of power, maybe he could make some kind of change happen.

“If you want to help me and our mission,” said Scroll. “You’re welcome. But Gunner...”

Gunner looked up.

“I don’t need someone to judge himself, to tell me about how he’s a bad pony. I don’t need you to, to lose sleep at night over the things you’ve done. I...” He paused for a moment. “I know I said some harsh things. I was angry earlier. But what I need now most of all, is a friend.”

---

White sat alone in the dark meeting room, seated at one end of a cold stone table. He watched the end of the hall as a stern soldier stood watch over him, peering over his shoulder. There would be no talk of sabotaging machines.

“Neeext,” said White.

He wasn’t sure what the walls were made of. Granite or limestone. Something like that. Geology was never his strongest subject. Something grey. Having come here from the room with all that bright red velvet and the mahogany desk, it gave him a headache. He could barely focus.

The door opened and his next interview subject entered. Another pony for White to listen to. Another pony to hurl some insults while White said some empty platitudes. He’d come to realize that he wasn’t there to pacify the earth ponies there anymore. He was a fall guy. Someone for them to lash out at so that the actual overlords didn’t have to worry about someone attacking them with their worktools, at least for now.

“Well, finally,” said the earth pony.

White looked up at him as he sat down. It was Carpenter.

“Been waiting for a while to talk to you,” said Carpenter. “Though now I guess I didn’t have to.”

White stared at him for a moment. “I’m sorry?”

“Well, I just wanted to tell you the kid was alright,” said Carpenter, shrugging. “Guess he escaped wherever he was being held in. Came to me and hid out in my quarters.”

The guard tensed up and looked threateningly at him. “That won’t be taken lightly. Prisoner contraband is—”

Carpenter cut him off. “Hey, fuck you. The kid’s not even with me anymore.”

“Please, can we...” White sighed, exasperated. “Please just tone it down a notch.”

“Anyway,” said Carpenter. “I heard about what you did to that bastard.”

“You mean the dentistry...”

Carpenter snorted. “I mean breaking his jaw. I gotta admit, I don’t think I expected it of you. I would’ve expected you to just stand there and give a speech. I was wrong. Good on ya.”

White looked at him blankly. “So I have your approval now, I guess? That... that’s what it took to get you to like me? I had to get violent?”

Carpenter breathed out through his nose, looking at him. He paused for a moment before adding, “I’m just saying you did what I’d do in your place.” He folded his legs on the table. “It’s what any father would do. Maybe now you can understand why I did what *I* did.”

White looked at him, silent for a moment. “Maybe...” he said. “Maybe I can understand the way you felt. Just how far you can find yourself going when you think that someone you care about’s been hurt.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“Because what I did was wrong,” said White. He was quiet. “I... I can’t do that again. I can’t let myself do that again...”

Carpenter sighed and rolled his eyes. “It’s not the first time. Remember old Driver?”

“I’m sorry...?” asked White.

“Green pony. Guy who had Clip running the garbage route. He was out for like a day after you knocked him in the head with a salt block.”

White’s stomach sank.



“It was kind of funny. He went to Quake to complain about it, but Quake must’ve been busy beating someone up or something, ‘cause he didn’t care.” Carpenter smiled. “So hey, giving that horner bastard a bit of magical fuckery isn’t too far out of your reach.”

“That... that’s not who I am.”

“Quite frankly, the cunt had it coming to him. You did more than you should’ve by fixing him up again. You’re beating yourself up for no reason. ”

“It is *not* no reason!” said White. “I... what if I do something like that again? What if I can’t make it right?”

“Then the next time some fucker hurts someone close to you, just do nothing,” said Carpenter in a low and sarcastic voice. “Maybe then you’ll feel all fucking moral.”

White didn’t say anything. He just sulked over his desk.

“So...” said Carpenter.

“Anything you feel like talking about?” asked White.

“I’d feel more like it if this jackass weren’t here,” said Carpenter, nodding disdainfully to the guard.

“Watch your tongue,” said the guard.

“Language, please,” monotoned White, “that’s a racial slur.”

“Just wanted to let you know that things could be worse,” said Carpenter. Then he went quiet for a moment. “I... was wondering. About the night we got captured.” His voice softened in concern. “Was... was Buzz...?”

“We found him,” said White, nodding. “He was hiding in the tavern. He’s alright.”

Carpenter deflated in relief. “I... guess I should thank you.”

“It’s okay,” said White. “What’s important is that your son is safe.”

“I hope he can handle himself,” said Carpenter. His eyes floated over to the wall, carried off on his own thoughts.

“Well, if he has trouble, Scroll can help him,” said White.

“If Scroll can even help himself,” said Carpenter.

“He...” said White, stopping himself. “He’s smart and he doesn’t piss off Quake the way I do. Pretty much every time we ever got in trouble was because of me. In all truth he’s probably better off than I am. He’s the one who’s... better at making things work. I just...” He looked down. “I feel like I’ve been sent up the river without a boat.”

“Excuse me?” asked Carpenter.

White looked up at him. Carpenter’s expression had changed. The casual jerk attitude had taken on a look of curiosity. And then White wondered...

Was Carpenter thinking what he thought he was? He couldn’t just ask; the guard would know. But then... White hadn’t played the lead in fifteen musicals since he got his cutie mark for bad acting.

“I said I feel like I’ve been sent up the river... without a boat,” said White. He tilted his head. “You know... when it’d be nice to have a boat in these situations, you know?” He gave an exaggerated sigh.

“I think I know exactly what you mean,” said Carpenter, slowly. “Well. Maybe I’ll talk to you later when you’re not feeling sorry for yourself.” He got up, and the guard made a threatening motion to him. “Relax, I was leaving.”

White watched as Carpenter left the room, and he wondered. Did Carpenter believe in Clip’s boat idea? Was there maybe, just maybe, some kind of chance in it? Maybe there was.

*Clip, thought White, I’m not giving up.*