

Building Bridges

"In order to obtain or create something, something of equal value must be lost or destroyed."

"Are you sure this will work? We are unconvinced." Platinum Haze tugged at the hem of her dress with her magic, and I saw the fabric on her back shift when she tried to move her wings.

"It will if you stop doing that." I reached up to pat her wings down. "And it worked before. Ponies see what they want to see."

"And nopony wishes to see an alicorn?"

"Er." I hope she didn't take offence to that. "I mean. Nopony would expect to see an alicorn. You're kind of rare... and mostly up north. It worked once, so it should work again."

She nodded sagely. "If you are certain." We were less than an hour away from an NCA encampment near the conflict at the Canyon Ridge Bridge. It was apparently the only currently functional route across the western canyon separating the Minotaur controlled territory from that controlled by the NCA and Dise. Going around was either impossible or would take weeks, and any other way across was dangerous at best so it had been a point of tension since the war reignited.

"We have another question to ask you," Platinum Haze said with a nervous tinge to her voice. When I nodded she continued. "We have noticed... we... First we should apologize. On our trip here we noticed you... we do not want to say the word 'sneaking,' but it seems appropriate... sneaking off in the morning, and we—"

"You followed me and saw what I did." Of course she did, and I knew she did anyway. There was a burning in my shoulder and I knew she was following me invisibly, but I didn't care. I had sort of hoped she wouldn't mention it out of embarrassment or something... "I'm addicted to Med-X," I said. "I..." My brow furrowed as I tried to explain. "I didn't mean to. I get beat up a lot and it... helped..." It helped so much. "I have enough... It's not a problem. For now. I know I need to get myself clean. But... there's so much to do. Only so much time. After, I promise." It was easier to say than I expected. I had known it was coming for a while, but somehow the words weren't as difficult to find as I had feared.

"We appreciate your honesty... While we cannot approve, we understand." There was a pause as I breathed a sigh of relief. "But." But was never good. "When we saw we... recalled an event. When you first discovered us and you were taken to the infirmary at the orphanage. Afterwards we noticed that some of our supplies were missing, specifically our supply of Med-X."

"Uh..." There was a long pause. Platinum Haze technically didn't ask me a question, so technically I didn't have to answer. Loopholes are fun.

"Was it you?" Her eyes narrowed, staring at me with such an intensity I couldn't bear to look at them.

"Uh..."

"Silver Storm." I hated it when people called me by that name. "Answer the question."

I gulped. "It... I..." I lowered my head. "Yes." Perhaps the problem was worse than I thought when I was stealing from orphanages.

"We see." She said nothing else, but kept up the glare. "As soon as there is time you will be getting yourself clean. This is not up for debate, and if you resist we will be very displeased."

See, I knew she would never hurt me, but just hearing the barely controlled anger in her voice was more terrifying than an entire legion of Steel Rangers. "Okay," I said meekly, which is not something I do often. "Sorry."

"If you do not do as we ask, we can assure you that you will be."

Well, that was ominous.

There was a lingering tension in the air that was so thick you could cut it with a knife. It would have been a lot more awkward had Serenity not taken that time to come running over.

"Momma! Haze!" She was really fast. "Some soldier-y ponies are heading this way; they don't look happy. It might be because I threw a rock at them when they asked me my name. But it was a really small rock, I promise."

"Serenity..." It was hard to scold her after getting a scolding myself, but I tried my best.

"Really small!" She assured me as two NCA soldiers ran towards us.

"Get back here you little runt!" one of them shouted, and I noted a small dent in his helmet when I saw him approach. "Whoa, wait." The two of them stopped and looked at each other in confusion before pointing their weapons at us. "Travel is restricted in this area, what's your business." Their guns, I noted, were pointed more at Platinum Haze than me. Even completely unarmed and wearing a dress, she made an imposing figure.

"And what's with your mane!" the second guard said. His voice seemed higher pitched, and I swear I heard it crack. It seemed the NCA recruited young. "It's all... all floaty."

"Er... we—" Before Platinum Haze could say anything I stepped forward.

"My companion's mother. She got irradiated while pregnant. It had... a strange effect." I doubted either of them were experts in the field of megaspell byproducts, so that'd work until I could think of a better lie.

"We're looking for the NCA base."

The guards shared another look as if judging if my story made any sense. "Why?"

"Major General Hailstorm sent us. We're... mechanics." I made a motion to my cybernetic leg. I'm not sure if that proved anything except that I was clumsy but they seemed to buy it because we weren't shot. "She was worried about your artillery. Wanted us to do some routine maintenance on it."

"And I'm Celestia's grandson," the older guard said with a sneer. "You're not getting into the camp with a story like tha—"

"I have proof." They stared incredulously at me.

"Well what is it?" The older guard asked impatiently.

"What if they're spies?" the younger one warned, which was a bit weird because that's not something you're supposed to say in front of the possible spies.

"Then we're the worst spies ever," I said digging out the note Hailstorm gave us and giving it to them. "Here. It says everything."

The two ponies took turns reading over the letter and giving us dirty looks. "You'll have to speak with General Stand Fast; he's in charge of operations and he'll want to verify things. Follow us." He turned to walk away as his younger companion continued to stare.

"If you run, we'll shoot you. Just to be safe," he clarified, before turning as well, leaving us no option but to follow. Though we did so at a distance so we could talk somewhat privately.

Not that it mattered, because as soon as we started walking Serenity asked, "You guys took forever to get dressed, what was keeping you?" and that sort of killed my mood for conversation.

"So." General Stand Fast was older than I expected, mostly balding and what wisps of mane he had left were white as snow. Not that I had ever actually seen snow. "Hailstorm sent you?" I noticed that he didn't call her by her rank, and nodded in reply.

We had been taken by the guards into the NCA camp, and it was much bigger than I expected. Set right on the edge of a massive canyon (Caledonia had so many canyons, I swear) it was a huge encampment surrounded by a monolithic wall of scrap metal and wood with a guard tower just about every ten meters. From the looks of it, it started off as a scattered camp, but tents were partially built over to form buildings in some places, while in other places the ageing tents were left to stand, marked by many patches and signs of constant repair. It gave the entire camp a sense of chaotic order. This was only magnified by the sheer multitude of ponies in the camp, more than I had seen in a single place outside of Dise. Nearly all of which wore some form of uniform, which made us stand out more in comparison.

"You know they passed over me for the rank of Major General," he said with an indignant snort. "For some up jumped filly with barely any experience. I've been a member of the NCA since before she was out of diapers!" Maybe his age was part of the problem, but I wasn't about to suggest that. "Why should I let you have free reign of my base?"

"Major General Hailstorm is your boss right?" I asked slowly, trying not to overstep.

"Yes, but she is far away and her signature could be forged."

"So, she gave you this position then? She must think highly of you. To give you command of such an important... er... base."

He seemed to think about that for a second. "I suppose you are right. Though I am no friend of hers, it is not as if she had intended to jump over me." She probably had, but that was something else I wasn't going to suggest. "So you are here to... look at the artillery?"

"That's correct." I gave my most reassuring smile. "We're the best in Caledonia. Taught my filly everything she knows. She even got her cutiemark in fixing things. Major General Ha-

"You're a liar." I was, but he didn't have to be so mean about it. Hurt my feelings. "You're too heavily armed to be a mechanic, and we already have our own mechanics. I don't know wh—"

"Right. I am a mercenary." He seemed taken aback by my sudden honesty. "My daughter however," I motioned towards Serenity who was grinning from ear to ear, "is a prodigy. We worked at the farm. Major General Hailstorm heard of her ability. One thing led to another and we were sent here. Serenity here thinks she can modify your artillery. Make it shoot further and more accurately."

The General narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Then why lie."

I gave him a good natured smile. "No pony would believe what this filly is capable of. It was necessary. But you're a reasonable stallion. Imagine the glory if these improvements work. No pony will know it was us. Or Hailstorm. Just you. You'll be a hero."

He considered that for a second before nodding. "Yes. Yes. You and your entourage will be given room and board for tonight, and free run of the camp -- barring any high security areas. You may also not leave the premises under any conditions. This is a war zone you're in, and it's for your safety. Not that you could anyway, all entrances are locked and under guard."

"Of course," I said, giving him a small smile. "We're not crazy."

"We are fairly certain that this plan is demonstrably crazy," was the first thing Platinum Haze said to me as soon as we had been left alone in the small room we were escorted to. It was a small, cramped room made from scrap, and still had a dirt floor. The bed looked nice and soft though.

"What's so crazy about it?" I thought it was a good plan.

"While it makes sense to use our invisibility to leave, our wings are too injured to fly over anything, not to mention carry."

I was pretty sure she was calling me fat. "You don't need to. We'll use Serenity's sound absorbing spell to sneak to the gate." I mimicked sneaking over to the door, "Then bang!" I gently kicked at the door. Obviously in practice it'd be a lot harder. "Lock broken."

Platinum Haze stared at me, but her expression was unreadable. Or I was terrible at reading expressions. "We suppose that could work, though there is still a problem."

I stood back up proper and looked at the door to make sure I didn't actually hurt it. "What?"

"Locks, as we understand it, exist for a purpose. By destroying their lock, we could be putting them in danger, which is not something we wish to do." That... was a well reasoned argument.

"Well. We don't have a lot of options." I shrugged. "We can't really stay here long. Serenity knows nothing about artillery. Our bluff will be called."

"That much we agree upon, we must leave tonight or sooner." Haze sighed. "But... we do not believe it is right to do so in a manner that puts others at risk."

"Not much of one." I was less sympathetic. To be honest, I had never found myself particularly enamoured to the NCA, and it wasn't as if a single lock would matter much. "They'll find the broken lock in the morning. And fix it."

"If they notice, we are unsure they will notice."

"Do you have a better option?"

"Well, no-"

"So it's settled," I said firmly. "We need to leave. It probably won't hurt anyone. Don't worry about it."

"We still worry, unforeseen consequences of our actions may be dire, and we wish to-"

"I have an option!" Serenity was standing in the doorway. I hadn't even heard the door open, or noticed she was gone... "I was waitin' fer tha perfect time to come in. Dramatically. But ya'lls were boring so I'm doing it now!" She trotted into the room and jumped on the bed.

"Where were you?"

"Shh, Momma." She put her hoof up to my lips to silence me. "No using the momma voice." I don't know what she was talking about. "And close the door, it's worth it. Promise." With a sigh I slowly closed the door. "Taaadaaaa!" And floating out of her pack in an aura of pink magic was a key ring with a single key on it.

Platinum Haze looked shocked, and so did I when it occurred to me what she had. "We must confess, we never considered that option."

"Where did you get that?" I put on my so called "momma voice" again.

"I found it." I stared at her. "In a desk." I kept staring. "In the general's office." I didn't take my gaze off her and she squirmed under the pressure. "Past a few armed guards. They didn't notice me though!" Only then did I look away from her, and she let out an audible sigh of relief.

"That was dangerous," I explained.

"But fun!" Was her counter, though at that point I think she was just trying to rile me up. "And it solved your problem. Everybody wins."

"Except the general. Who you tricked and stole from." I said, trying my best to sound disappointed.

"He'll get over it." Serenity jumped off the bed and headed towards the door.

"We are wondering where it is you think you are going?" Platinum Haze interjected.

Serenity stopped and turned back, "Er, leaving? We can turn invisible, what point is there to waiting for night?" The fewer people around to see the magically moving gate for one, but she seemed to enthusiastic.

"Let's go," I said, following her.

It was an interesting experience walking around in what should be plain view, but having nobody notice your existence. Also a lot more work than I had anticipated. I was not a small pony (have I mentioned that before?) so trying to navigate the crowded base making sure I didn't touch anybody, or accidentally knock something over was fairly difficult. It also had the problem of me not actually being able to see Platinum Haze, so I guess I was once again lucky I could sense magic.

And wasn't that just a weird way to think of it considering.

Eventually we made it to the gate to find it locked and barred. Unlike the slightly slapdash wall of wood and metal topped with barbed wire, it was a huge metal sliding door that looked like they ripped it off of some warehouse. Which was probably exactly what they did.

Surprisingly, it was not guarded directly, but instead had two massive watch towers made from shaky-looking scrap metal that rose from either side of it. I suppose they didn't really expect anybody to sneak out, and certainly not in the middle of the day. We were rebels though.

We walked straight towards the door. I couldn't see, but I heard the click when the door was unlocked. I whispered as silently as I could, "Okay, slide it open quietly."

"Momma," Serenity said in her normal voice, "I'm magicking. Ain't nopony can hear us. Can do it on the door too, simple as cake..." She paused for a second before adding, "Oh! We should steal some cake before we go." When I didn't answer she eventually said, "Or not." And started to slide the door open.

It was a weird experience hearing the door creak open loudly, but not seeing who was opening it, and knowing that nobody would hear except me. Well us. When the door was open enough the three of us (I assume, I couldn't see them) slipped out, and the door was closed behind us. All and all it was much easier than I was expecting.

"We should hurry," I said. "Haze, how is your magic holding up?" I didn't want to wear her out.

"We are fine, and shall be for many more hours. We possess an expansive magical reserve." Right. It did make me glad she was on my side, though I supposed even if she weren't it wasn't like she'd try to kill me.

"Alright." I continued towards the bridge, hoping our entire enterprise had been unnoticed.

"Hope it don't rain." Huh. I looked up to the sky when Serenity mentioned that, and sure enough the sky was filled with thick clouds. I hadn't even noticed. I had lived so long with the cloud cover that it seemed normal to me, even though I probably should have noticed. I was still getting used to the sun. "Scootaborg doesn't like getting wet." Serenity exclaimed. Probably because she was a cyborg. I could understand; I was very glad when I finally got water resistant cybernetics.

The bridge before us was a pretty fancy looking suspension bridge. Though it looked fancier from far away, when we got closer the effects of time showed in its rusted form. The top of it was cluttered with debris and old long-abandoned carriages. Also mines.

Serenity saw the first one, and thank Celestia she did as I was about to put my hoof down on one. Of course it didn't stop at just one, there were hundreds. From then on our progress slowed to a crawl. None of us were keen on being exploded, and I at least was worried about the mines causing a chain reaction. As cool as that would look (and I'm sure Flare would agree), I wasn't sold on being in the middle of it. Partway through the bridge I noticed the mines changed design, so I supposed that both sides were culpable in this frustrating endeavour. It did not help that the closer to the middle of the bridge we were, the more it seemed to sway in the wind. I was just thankful I wasn't close enough to see off the edge to see of it.

By the time we reached the other side I was drenched in sweat from the tension, and muttered. "Lets never do that again."

"We have to on the way back, though we suppose it might be easier knowing where everything is." Platinum Haze reminded me.

"I'll ride on you. Like Serenity did."

"Not enough room for Momma." Serenity explained. Did I mention how weird it was not being able to see the people I was speaking to?

"And you will probably need to carry the pony we are rescuing." Right, I had forgotten about that. Dammit.

Since there was no point worrying about it, we moved on. The Minotaur camp was not hard to find, but it was thankfully less guarded. It lacked the massive walls of the NCA camp, had no gate, and only two large watch towers, both pointed towards the bridge. I suppose it wasn't as if they were going to get attacked from any other direction, so more advanced security was pointless.

The camp itself was a bit of a mess, but I suppose that made sense for a people that seemed to worship Discord. The centre of the camp was a giant three story building that I guessed was some sort of factory before the war, but now I imagined was the head quarters. Helping confirm this was the fact the camp, which was little more than a cluster of tents and prewar buildings, spiralled out from the centre point, slowly thinning in density until the buildings just sort of stopped. Compared to the organized chaos of the NCA camp, this was more of chaotic chaos.

We shuffled closer to the camp, keeping our movements slow so we didn't do something stupid like kick up a bunch of dust. It was stressful, to say the least, knowing we would probably be killed if we made the smallest mistake. I couldn't imagine the minotaurs took kindly to invisible ponies sneaking around their camp.

Once we got into the camp proper I felt the weight drop off a little though. Guards posted in guard towers were expected to look for trouble, whereas random folk walking around the camp would probably be less suspicious. It was still nerve wracking, just less so.

I suppose it helped that once we made it into the camp nobody was even so much as looking in our direction. I wasn't sure why, but it seemed like every minotaur in the area was heading towards the centre huge building. It did make me realize it was a mistake going in the day and not night, because regardless of how invisible you are if you bump into someone you're going to get found out.

But, it was what it was. "We should check it out," I said under Serenity's spell, so nobody could hear but us.

"We had thought our job was to find the captured pony and return him unharmed." Platinum Haze did not seem convinced.

"It is." I said, watching as minotaurs passed close enough that I could count the hairs on their head. "But this seems important. And. He is probably in there."

"We suppose..."

"Good!"

It was more difficult to get to the main building than I thought. The mess of tents and buildings got thicker the nearer they were to the centre building, and at least twice we made a wrong turn and ended up in a dead end. By the time we got to the factory everyone was inside and the doors were shut and barred, not that we would risk trying to open them with so many minotaurs inside.

Still, I was not about to give up that easily. I stalked around one side of the building, then another, looking for another entrance. I didn't find that, well not exactly. What I did find was a shaky looking metal fire escape clinging onto the side of the building, leading to an emergency exit.

"There." I pointed to the fire escape's collapsible ladder, but then felt like an idiot when I remembered I was invisible. "Up there, the ladder."

A second later Haze's purple magic enveloped the sliding ladder and gently... pulled it off. Apparently two hundred years of rust left it very fragile. "Oh..." Haze gently placed the ladder down against the wall.. "We could fly up there..."

"No. Your wing is still injured."

"Then how are yo—" I ran forward towards the ladder. It shook as I charged up it, and cracked when I pushed off backwards. Turning in midair I reached my hooves out and connected with the fire escape platform with both hooves. I dangled there for only a second before swinging my lower body to help pull myself up.

"I was an active kid. This place reminds me of home." I explained, but I am not sure how good an explanation it was. "Don't think this will hold all of us..." It was shaky enough with just me. "You wait here. Serenity with me."

"We cannot keep you invisible without keeping sight; if you are determined to do this, we pray that you will be careful." I saw a ball of magic surround something vaguely pony shaped and float up to me, and a weight on my back a few seconds later confirmed Serenity was with me.

"We will."

"We're ninjas!" Serenity explained as we headed up the rickety fire escape. Did I ever mention how much I hated heights? I hated them even more on rickety metal platforms, especially after that incident at the train station. Still, I had a job to do so I didn't balk, though perhaps I was a bit paler than usual.

This was confirmed for me when the magic surrounding us turned off revealing the two of us. I let out a sigh when the pressure on my shoulder was lifted. Well, partially, Serenity's magic was still around me...

which was a bit surprising. Her magic must have been getting stronger, as I didn't think she could hold it for so long.

"Are you okay?" I asked quietly as we reached the top. "I don't want you to overtax yourself."

"Fine." Serenity said quickly, while at the same time hopping off my back to take a look at the door. It was old and rusted, and most importantly the wall around it had partially crumbled so it was easy to open.

"What were you'n Haze arguin' about before?"

"Er..." That was an effective way to change the subject. I peeked through the crumbled wall to make sure the room behind was empty before opening the creaking door. "Nothing." I stepped inside and coughed. Centuries of dust and decay hit my nostrils like a sledge hammer. "Ugh." The places I've been, and the things I've smelled. They were going to haunt my dreams for years, assuming I lived that long.

"That's not an answer." Serenity skipped into the room behind me. Other than giving a brief scowl she seemed unperturbed by the smell.

"Uh..." I said in my usual charismatic way. I walked forward into the room and looked around while I tried to gather my thoughts. The room was a dark and dusty office of some sort with much of the interior lost to time. Just rubble that sort of resembled desks and a few errant bones, but no full skeleton to be seen. "I guess the minotaurs don't use this room." On one side of the room there was a huge glass window, but it was so covered up in dust and grime I couldn't see through it.

"Also not an answer." Serenity walked towards the window I was looking at and pressed her face against it. I don't think she saw anything, and all it seemed to accomplish was dirtying her face. "You should answer."

With a sigh I pulled Serenity close and used my barding to wipe the grime off her face. "It's nothing you should worry about." I then used my barding to wipe at the window. It sort of worked. Through it I thought I saw figures below, lots of them, but it was so blurry as to be useless.

"Ah'm already worrying." She said with a frown, squinting through the window. "You two like never fight, it's weird an' ah don't like it."

"We're over it now." Well, sort of. I was pretty sure Haze was still mad at me, not without reason. I looked around the room until I found a door on the same wall as the window. I pointed to it. "I promise. If anything serious happens. I'll tell you. Okay?"

She chewed on her lip for a few seconds before reluctantly sighing. "Fine."

"Thank you." I slowly opened the door and peeked outside.

True to what I had suspected, it was a rather large factory area. The door led out to a metal catwalk that snaked over the factory floor (it seemed like an odd design to me) before leading to stairs that led down. The floor looked to be partially cleared of whatever machines had been used here long before, though some conveyer belts apparently were too difficult to remove. Which I suppose worked for the minotaurs as they were using it as a soapbox of sorts, with a couple of them standing on it calling for attention.

The floor was absolutely awash with minotaurs; there were even more here than were at the train station. They were crowded in the building so tight it looked like it would be hard to move, and each and every

one of them were carrying weapons. Though oddly none of them wore uniforms, and even the armour they wore tended to be vastly different in style.

“Quiet! Quiet!” The minotaur on the conveyor belt was walking back and forth. He was unarmed, and wore no clothing, but when he spoke the rest of them listened. “Today is an auspicious day. After the betrayal by the NCA, we have finally regained contact with our bases across the canyon!” There was a great cheer. “Our Prime Minister has returned, and he is here!” What.

Sure enough, across the catwalk the King himself walked out as if on cue, his gaze searching the room. He looked older than last time I saw him, and he seemed to be limping. His gaze passed over the door I was peeking out of, but he did not seem to notice me.

“The longer we wait here across the canyon, the longer the NCA has to rally forces against us. They are in talks with the Enclave, who now possess a great warship. If this deal is established they will not need the bridge, nor will they need to spend the time and money taking the long journey to us around the canyon and river.” His voice seemed strained, but he did what he could to put on a show. “We must strike, and now. Right now we have spies in their midst, replacing and neutralizing their scouts and watchmen. In the cover of darkness we will cross the bridge. Maps have been made to avoid the mines, and if we go single file not a minotaur will be lost.”

Another cheer, this one louder.

The king rose his fist into the air to silence the crowd. “They have refused to capitulate, as they have in the past. Their words drip honey as they sharpen knives behind their backs. When they destroyed our farms and cattle, we tried to sue for peace, but they tricked our delegation and refused to release them. Even still they blame us for retaliating and burning Hoof Town. Still, we made peace. Once again they encroach on our land, and made false platitudes backed up by fire. No more. We gave them too many chances. Too many lives. Tonight chaos shall reign, as it should be.”

That was enough for me and I slowly backed out of the room, closing the door. Serenity looked at me worriedly, “It’s not our concern,” I tried to say.

She replied, “It will be...” Soon it would be everyone’s concern. It seemed to me nobody wanted this war, and each side blamed the other for breaking this truce and former ones. A misunderstanding, obviously, but one set up to happen. They had been enemies for so long, it was easy to jump to the wrong conclusion even when all the facts didn’t add up. If only they spoke to each other, tried...

But I couldn’t blame their mistrust, nor could I blame the NCR’s. Something had to give, and The Watchers knew where the weakest points were. If this war erupted in full, Dise would need The Watchers for stability, and when that happened...

I don’t know. Something bad. “Let’s go,” I said in a whisper. “The pony we’re looking for. He’s not here.” I left the room. It had started raining lightly, but getting stronger by the second. I wasn’t a fan of the rain, it always reminded me of my mother.

We made our way down the stairs, and I could see Platinum Haze standing there. She must have been trying not to drain her magic. “Nothing,” I said jumping down beside her. “Just war talks. We need to keep looking.”

"We see," With a painful burst of magic we were invisible. Just in time for thunder to crack and the rain to pour even harder. My mane was soaked in seconds, and it chilled me to the bone.

"Great," I mumbled to myself and started walking with the others, following my magic sensing ability thing... We turned onto a side street as we heard the large group of minotaurs exit the factory. We weren't on a main street, just some back alley, and we waited as we saw a few minotaurs pass in front of us on the main road.

Then we heard footsteps behind us. I turned to see two minotaurs walking down the alley, guns ready. I turned forward and two more. This couldn't be good.

"We can see you." One said.

Shit.

Shit shit. How could they... then I looked at Platinum Haze and realized I was an idiot. The rain. It was raining, but we were still stopping it in the air, how dense could I get? Apparently very.

"Serenity," I said quietly and felt her magic fade, at the same time Platinum Haze's did. "What do you want?" I asked the minotaurs, my mouth ready to fire. I didn't though. I wasn't a fool, I couldn't fight an entire army. Well... I could, but I didn't want to. "We mean you no harm."

"We don't care." One minotaur grunted. "The prime minister wishes to see you. And nobody else is to see you. Come quickly. Or else." Great, this was going great.

We were led quickly to an obscure building, being careful that no one else other than the four guards saw us. We were eventually shoved into a small empty building and told to wait. It took over half an hour for the door to open again, and the Minotaur King to walk through.

He did look older than before. Weary, and limping. I don't know what happened to him, and I wasn't sure I wanted to. "Hired Gun," he said, his voice echoing, "you are not dead."

"Not for lack of trying. I assure you."

"I saved her! From a scorpion!" Serenity grinned happily.

"I am sure you did, little one." His gaze fell on Platinum Haze, "We have not had the pleasure, though I am sure you have quite a story." Platinum Haze nodded and stayed quiet. "Hired, what are you doing here? You are lucky it was I who saw you, and I still owe you for saving my life, and removing the scorpion problem."

"We're looking for a pony. Dead Whisper. You captured him." Might as well get down to business, I did not want to take longer than necessary.

"We do not usually. I was not here when it happened, and would not have approved, but the General wished it to be so. He told us about the Enclave, and not willingly. We have no more use for him, we planned to keep him locked up for now, why do you need him?"

"Can't you just take my word?"

The king shook his head. "No." He leaned down to look me in the eye, "Do not play games. I am tired, and the night will be long."

"He's a megaspell," I said simply, which made the king visibly flinch. "Like the Laughing Stallion. Who blew up the train station. If you keep him... well..."

"How can you know this?" The shock turned into suspicion in his eyes.

"I don't. Not for sure. But do you want to take that risk?"

He seemed to consider that for a moment, crossing his arms and leaning heavily against the wall. "I trust you. Against my better judgement. Were it anypony else I would stab them through and be done with it. But I cannot broker such a risk against my people. It seems we are forced into this foolhardy war, and more death I cannot abide."

"You do not wish the war?" Haze interrupted suddenly. "Then why not call it off? Forgive us, but you are their Prime Minister, their leader. Is it not in your power to end it?"

"No." He said closing his eyes with a deep sigh. "I cannot. Governance is not always top down, and I cannot stop what has happened. If I tried my Generals would call me a traitor and put my head on a spike. Those loyal to me would fight back, but many more hate ponies than they like me. Minotaur blood would be shed, but the war with the NCA would remain, only we would be sure to lose. Under my guidance we might be able to make this war short, maybe..." He grimaced. "I would, if such a power belonged to me."

Platinum Haze looked confused, but didn't argue further. Considering what she lived through, it must have been hard for to imagine a situation where the leader wasn't in complete control. The Goddess, from what I heard, wasn't one to accept a disagreement.

"The NCA seem similarly stuck. I'm not sure they want a war." I said.

"Then perhaps there is hope." he didn't seem convinced, and I wasn't surprised. Why would he accept my bleak optimism. "But, this pony. I will bring him to you. My guards will escort him outside the camp, and you may take him. Most will think he is going to be killed. Then leave... and" His eyes snapped opened, and looked at me. I never realized how bright they were, just a shining yellow that seemed to make his whole face light up. "Get far away. Far from Dise, to the NCA, or Equestria. For Discord's sake, go to Roam, and live in the scorching heat, but if you are in the Dise area, I cannot guarantee your safety."

"I understand." I paused for a long time, long enough for the King to start to leave. "Wait!" He turned to look at me. "What if... what if I could postpone it."

"Postpone... what?" he didn't understand, his face was scrunched in confusion.

"The war."

"Are you a god, to promise such a thing."

"The NCA. They aren't going to get Enclave help." He raised an eyebrow. "So... you don't need to attack."

"You should be aware, your assurances won't be enough."

"So... if I could. Pause the war. Would you be okay with it? Would you... if you wouldn't be harmed."

"Explain."

I shook my head slowly. "I just need an answer."

"Do it," he said and walked out into the rain.

With the rain pouring outside, and the minotaurs all inside their tents, it wasn't difficult to leave the encampment and go to where we were told to meet up. With the dark night and heavy rain there was little worry about being seen far away from the camp, so we turned the magic off and instead Platinum Haze created a shield above our heads to keep us dry from the rain. Which was sort of pointless because we were already soaking wet, but it was the thought that counts.

"I'm bored," Serenity mumbled. "How long we gotta wait?" It had been nearly an hour waiting, and I had to agree it was far longer than I felt was necessary.

"Not much longer." In the distance I could see it. The rain fell hard, but there were large patches of air that were not hit by a single drop, and they were moving closer.

Platinum Haze must have saw it as well, because she commented, "It seems we are not the only ones who can become invisible."

Sure enough the figures came close, two minotaur sized ones, and one pony. Then without so much as a warning the pony became visible, and was pushed towards us, as the others moved back into the storm.

"Come here." The figure was wet, and shadowed by the dark night. "Under here, it'll be drier." The pony slumped towards the makeshift umbrella, and into the light of Haze's horn.

He was an averaged sized stallion by any guess, but I could see he was stronger than his size might suggest. His mane was long and dirty, and either the colour of mud or so covered in mud it was impossible to determine. His eyes were a vibrant green, but one was swollen and blackened. He was still wearing his NCA uniform I realized eventually, but it was so ripped and stained to be completely unrecognizable at first.

"You are?" I asked as Serenity watched on from my back, and Platinum Haze from beside me.

He spat out blood so red it looked black. "Lucky." He didn't look like Major Lucky to me. "Master Corporal Whisper." he eventually admitted. Just the pony we were looking for. "Is this a dream? An Alicorn, like Luna, you look just like her."

"We do not, in fact. While we are blue like Luna, we are a different colour blue, and our mane and eyes could not be more different, though we understand the confusion as Luna is no longer around."

"Not Luna. Right. Who are you then."

"Ninjas!" Serenity exclaimed from my back.

"Friends." I corrected.

"Friends of minotaurs." He was keeping his distance as much as he could. "How else could I be here."

"From time to time," I admitted. I sat down on the ground and sighed, letting Serenity slide off my back. It had been a long day, but at least there were no dragons. "I'm Hired Gun... a mercenary of sorts. Or I was... I'll be honest. I don't know what I am."

"Saved by a question mark. Great." I liked him.

"This is Serenity, my daughter." She trotted up beside me. "And my marefriend, Platinum Haze."

"Never heard of any of you." He sat down too, made things more amiable when he didn't look like he was about to flee. "You're not NCA. Why are you here?"

"For you. You..." I looked him over but couldn't see any signs of cybernetic modifications. "You did get cybernetics right? Tell me about them, and where you got them."

"Oh, we're playing twenty questions." He looked thoughtful for a second. "I wasn't able to get an appointment at the Black Salamander. I still wanted something though, and I heard about that other company. Cerberus. I mentioned them to my superior, and they managed to set up an appointment with me and a few others on conditions we didn't mention where we got them from because the NCA has a contract with Mr. House to get all shit from him."

"What happened then?"

"I'm getting to it! Don't rush me." He held his head with a hoof, and I thought I saw a bit of metal. "It was weird, we met in some ruined buildings near... the Watcher Compound I think. We were lead underground and then... we were led out two days later. I don't remember anything else. I got some bone reinforcements, things to make me stronger, and a blade in my hoof... minotaurs broke that though." I winced at the thought. "Not as obvious as yours."

"Few cybernetics are." I snorted. "Tell me. Does your hoof burn?"

The question hung in the air, and for a long while all I could hear was the sound of rain.

"Yes..." He looked up at the magic umbrella. "Near magic..." he whispered. "They said I was insane... how did you know?"

I rubbed my shoulder that was still burning. "Lucky guess. It's..." I sighed, how to explain without scaring the piss out of him? "When you get back. Medical tests will be done. Lots. Then you'll be safe."

"So I'm not now..." He figured that much out at least, but I couldn't bear to tell him any more than that. "Who is Cerberus?"

One arm of an octopus. Like Celestia's Vision, Dragonslayer, and The Enclave. All controlled and manipulated by the Watchers, strangling Dise from so many different directions at once they were too busy chasing shadows to see the threat. "I don't know." It was too much to explain.

"Damn," he sighed. "I wanted to know who I need to enact revenge on."

"One day."

"Well, I can still kill some minotaurs." He seemed way too happy about that.

"Probably not."

He frowned and looked back at the camp. "So... you rescued me. For secret reasons. Because I'm in a bad way, but you can't tell me how, and you won't let me get revenge, and won't tell me why?"

"When you put it like that, you make it sound as if we are secretive." Platinum Haze said.

"Says the freaking alicorn!" He rubbed his temple, "Whatever. I'm sore. I hope whatever is going on, you guys have some idea what you're doing. And aren't complete idiots."

I gave him my most reassuring smile, "We do... and... I know a pegasus who you would get along with." It seemed every stallion I met was either a bastard or some sort of master of snark. Stallions are weird.

"Right." He seemed unconvinced.

I stood back up and motioned for him to do the same. "We need to go now." I started walking towards the bridge as lightning flashed overhead, and thunder boomed. They all followed; apparently the Master Corporal just accepted that I was the leader. Which was good. I couldn't be bothered to argue any further with him when I had work to do.

The walk across the bridge was more difficult this time than it was before. The wind was whipping, and the ground was slick, and it wasn't like there were fewer mines than there were before. Dead Whisper being injured from his stay with the minotaurs didn't help.

He didn't seem to take it too badly though. He stood up straight, and spoke with confidence, but whenever he thought we weren't looking he limped along. At one point he nearly tripped into a mine, but Platinum Haze caught him with her magic. He almost seemed thankful, but didn't say as much.

By the time we got to the end of the bridge, we all looked exhausted and tired. It was a shame that we wouldn't be able to sleep indoors that night, as much as I would have liked. Lightning cracked in the distance, revealing the bridge in an eery glow. It was a large bridge, with two large towers rising up into the sky on each side, and a mess of cables connecting them. I imagine that each side had snipers up in those towers from time to time, but I hoped there wasn't anyone up there.

"Platinum." She looked down on me, rain pouring down her face. "I know I asked a lot of you. But one more thing. Then like... a week's rest"

"When you spoke to the minotaur king, we had realized what it is you were planning." Her horn started to glow, then another layer of purple glow covered the first. Off towards the bridges a thousand dots of purple magic appeared.

I knew what she was doing. And when lightning struck once more I could see well enough to confirm it. She had picked up every mine on the bridge she could see, maybe a hundred, or more, it was hard to tell, and floated them towards the far tower.

Her magic faded, and I knew it was ready.

"What are you doing!" Dead Whisper said far too loudly. "The bridge, we need it to-"

A pink ball of magic surrounded his head, and not a sound came out. He looked confused for a second and tried to yell louder but it didn't work. "Let Momma explain."

I turned to the Master Corporal, standing as tall as I could and looking down on him. "This war is pointless. You have been manipulated. I don't care if you believe me. But this war can't continue. This will postpone it. Maybe. Fewer lives will be lost. In any case. I'll find the ones who started it. And prove it was them."

The magic faded and Dead Whisper looked around in confusion, "You're insane." Was I? I suppose it was possible, but I had never considered it. I did see dead ponies...

"Maybe." I gave a half-hearted shrug. "If I am. Then it's what Dise needs." Lightning flashed overhead, and I could see his face, frozen in grim determination, for only a split second. "Go home. You need it."

I turned towards the bridge and I could hear him run off. It was pointless of course, I had already decided how this was going to go. Lightning struck the bridge's tower and I shot.

Subtlety's bullet hit true. There was a split second delay and...

The explosion was deafening.

It wasn't all at once, but one exploded and it triggered more and more so it started quieter until more and more exploded in a cacophony of fire and steel. The impact hit us a second later, nearly knocking Serenity over, and when the smoke cleared you could see the damage.

The far tower of the bridge was buckled over sideways like it had been struck in the gut. It creaked and groaned for a long time, slowly bending over more and more. Until it fell.

The tower toppled but came to a sudden stop as the cables attaching it to the other tower tightened. Only for a second though, and that was all it took. The Tower fell, and with it the other tower toppled. Concrete stretched and broke apart, louder than any explosion, and the pieces fell like the rain into the canyon far below. It was over.

Lightning struck once more revealing the damage. The lead up to the bridge still existed, but the stone quickly turned into a gaping chasm where the rest of the bridge once stood. The second tower had collapsed forward, lying across the remains of the bridge and sticking out into the abyss so delicately it looked like it was about to fall over too. No army would cross that gap, not without Enclave help.

Behind us I heard yelling.

The NCA was coming. Even in the storm it was impossible to ignore what had just happened. I looked at Haze, and just like that we vanished into the night. I'm sure that if they really tried they could have found our outline in the rain as we left the scene, but they never did. They were too amazed by what had happened.

Maybe the NCA and the Minotaurs would tear themselves into bloody bits. Maybe what I did meant nothing in the long run, when eventually the two sides threw so many lives at each other that nobody on either side would remain. But it wouldn't be tonight. And that's what mattered.

Level Up!

Skill Note: Sneak 80

((A/N: Hi, No One here. I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and I just want to give my thanks to Kkat for creating FoE. And to my Editors TheBSDude, Julep and Menti, as well as to the guy who does the audiobooks, EquestrianNarrator for his help as well. Without these guys this story would be nothing. So Cheers.))

[Index](#)