



Archives of the
Friendquisition

Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	9
Chapter 3	17
Chapter 4	24
Chapter 5	33
Chapter 6	40
Chapter 7	48
Chapter 8	57
Chapter 9	66
Chapter 10	74
Chapter 11	82
Chapter 12	90

Chapter 1

The heavy rain beat rhythmically against the windows of the Lazy Saddle Tavern. It was the last stop on the road from Holy Canterlot before reaching the sprawling cityscape of Hippopolis, only a few hours walk away. Outlines of the city's majestic spires could be seen on the horizon with every flash of lighting.

Knowing of the scheduled thunderstorm beforehand, much of the townsfolk from the surrounding farmland came to the tavern to wait out the rain with good company and a tall glass of cider. The crowd was earth-pony gardeners and farm-hands mostly, but a couple unicorns sat together with a table to themselves, and one pegasus Meq-Adept discussed a new thresher design with a few interested buyers. The air hummed with their cheerful chatter, until the door swung open.

For a moment all eyes turned to the open door, and the room fell silent. A pony strode in, wearing a leather cloak and a hat with a brim that obscured his eyes, but not his salt-and-pepper coat. Both were soaked, and a puddle began to form on the floor where he stopped just inside the doorway.

Another, much larger figure dressed much the same followed behind him. He was a light shade of brown, built like a draft horse, and sported a small goatee. The first gave a slight nod, and the bulky companion found his way to an empty table against the wall. Then the stranger approached the barkeep.

"My friend and I will have two glasses," he said quietly. The barkeep blinked for a moment, but nodded and went to fetch the tall mugs. Murmurs of conversation returned to the room, though with a more guarded tone than before.

"You two aren't from around here, I see," said the barkeep when he returned with the drinks and a somewhat forced smile. "We get folks passing through here all the time on the road to Hippopolis, but most of 'em

check the weather forecast beforehand. Did you forget we were getting a storm?"

"We have pressing business," the strange pony replied. "It couldn't wait." He took both glasses back to the table where his companion was, and both drank their ciders without so much as a word between them. They surveyed the room, just as several patrons around it eyed them back nervously. When the stranger finished his glass, he brought it back to the bar.

"Another, please," he said.

As the barkeep refilled his glass, he turned to the stranger. "Is there anything else you need? A place to spend the night, maybe? The rain's supposed to let up, but not until late. Everypony else will head home once it does, but Hippopolis is still too far to make it before nightfall."

"That won't be necessary," replied the stranger. Then, as he was about to leave again, he leaned in. "Actually, perhaps there is something else you can help us with."

At this, the barkeep cocked his head. "You name it, friend. Whatever we can do. We here at the Lazy Saddle pride ourselves on our hospitality."

"We're here on behalf of some market vendors from Holy Canterlot, and we're supposed to meet a supplier from around here tomorrow. Since we got here early, and everypony seems to be here right now, maybe you could point him out for us."

"Uh, sure," the barkeep said, "who are you looking for?"

"A pony by the name of Seedy Core, owner of Malus Orchards."

The barkeep seemed suddenly relieved. "Oh, everypony knows Seedy around here. His is the biggest orchard in town. Let's see... Yup, there he is, with some of his buddies over in that corner." He pointed to a table where several ponies were huddled, apparently playing a card game. The stranger thanked him, paid for the drinks, and strode across the room toward Seedy's table

“Excuse me, gentleponies,” he said as he approached them, “but I’m looking for Seedy Core.”

The ponies at the table all stopped and turned to face the stranger. The one directly opposite, a stocky pony with a wiry, unkempt mane and a plow harness spoke up. “Well, you found him. Something I can do for you?”

“My name is Caballus,” he answered, “and I’d like to discuss a shipment from your Orchard that arrived in Holy Canterlot a few days ago.” Caballus reached into a saddlebag under his cloak and set a bright red apple on the table.

The orchard owner inspected the fruit for a moment. “Could be one of mine... Is there some sort of problem with it?”

“Actually, there is.” In a burst of motion, Caballus dove across the table, tackling Seedy and pinning him against the wall.

Seedy’s friends around the table all jumped to their feet. Before any of them could intervene, however, Caballus’s companion was amongst them. Though outnumbered, the massive stallion had little trouble keeping the disorganized group at bay while Caballus held Seedy.

“I’d call this a problem,” he growled, smashing the apple and holding up the mashed fruit to Seedy’s face. The pulp was writhing with ugly, bloated worms. “Your whole shipment was infested with Cheat-worms.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” cried the squirming pony. Others, many of whom worked for Seedy, were getting up at other tables. Soon there would be more than Caballus’s brawling companion could handle. A couple had drawn slingshots, pulling them back with their teeth and pointing them menacingly at the pair.

But none of them fired. Everypony who was holding a slingshot suddenly felt something pressed to the back of their own heads. A half-dozen pies floated in mid air, each suffused by a green glow. A female unicorn the same green hue strode nonchalantly into the middle of the group, her horn giving off the same green glow. “I thought it looked like you could use a hoof, sir,” She said with a casual tone.

“Much obliged, Mystic,” said Caballus. He shoved Seedy over to his large ally. “Roughshod, take him outside. We need to talk to him privately.”

“Sure thing, boss,” Roughshod said with a grin, manhandling Seedy toward the door. Some of the farmhands began to protest.

“I suggest you all stay out of our business,” Caballus announced, holding up his hoof to the mob. In it was a stylized F with three bars behind it, and the symbol of his absolute authority.

“Friendquisition.”

The several ponies in the crowd gasped and others staggered backward. None challenged him. They simply watched, eyes and mouths wide, as the Inquisipony dragged their friend and neighbor away.

Once the group was outside, Roughshod shoved Seedy into the mud.

“Cheat-worms are an exotic and very, very illegal species, Seedy,” Caballus said, talking over the downpour with an authoritative tone. “Fruit contaminated with Cheat-worm eggs are almost impossible to detect because they look perfectly healthy. Better than perfect, in fact, because the eggs cast an illusion that makes them even more enticing to pony eyes. That’s why they’re called ‘Cheat-worms.’ Because an unscrupulous businesspony can infect his crop, sell it at a premium, and skip town before everypony gets sick.”

“Please!” Seedy cried, his tears invisible in the rain, “please, I-I had no idea about the worms. Please don’t-“

Roughshod lifted Seedy up by his harness again, until his hind legs flailed around trying to reach the ground.

“Unfortunately for you,” Caballus continued, “one of your crates was delayed long enough for the worms to hatch before they could be eaten. It had already made it past two magical inspections before it was discovered.”

Caballus stepped in close to Seedy’s face. His eyes narrowed. “That shipment was to be delivered to a garrison of Holy Canterlot’s Equestrian

Guard. Not only are you dealing in dangerous and forbidden wildlife, but you threatened the security of Princess Celestia Herself.” By now his voice seethed with barely-restrained anger. “Tell me where you got them.”

Seedy began to tremble harder, less now from being cold and wet, and more from sheer terror. The Friendquisition weren’t known for their mercy. Nor did they deal with crimes that carried anything less than the harshest punishments.

“It-it’s not m-my f-fault,” he pleaded, “I s-swear I didn’t know! There was this... this strange blight going around the orchard this season. I-I lost my entire crop! Then some merchant came through town, and offered to sell me whole cartfuls of his apples. I knew the price he gave me was too good to be true, b-but I was desperate. I never thought they’d be wormy!”

Caballus glared silently at Seedy for a moment. “I believe you,” he said at last, “so if you tell us anything you know about this merchant that will help us find him, I’ll hand you over to the local sheriff. If it turns out to be a dead end, I will come back here, drag you to a Friendquisitionary dungeon, and you will never see Celestia’s shining daylight again.”

From a dark second story window of the Lazy Saddle, two pairs of eyes watched the scene below through slightly parted curtains.

“You know,” said one of the watchers, her voice like soft velvet, “With the Friendquisition involved, our plans are a bit more... complicated.”

“My plans,” the other scoffed, “are perfectly fine. I’ve considered every possible contingency, especially the Friendquisition. They’re already playing their parts perfectly.”

“Hmmm, I hope you’re right,” purred the first, leaving the window. “From the look of him, I wouldn’t mind doing a little ‘playing.’” She giggled to herself at the thought. “We should return home soon, though. I’ll inform the others, and we can leave as soon as the Inquisipony is gone.”

“If you must...” the second mumbled after her. His gaze remained fixed on the scene below. The sheriff had arrived and Seedy was being

loaded into a paddy-wagon. “She is right, you Equestrian fool...” he muttered to himself. Then he smiled. Rows of sharp, misshapen teeth glistened in the darkness. “Toying with you will make things so much more interesting...”

Chapter 2

Caballus impatiently paced the passenger compartment of his prop-balloon, *Her Solar Majesty*. Flying had never felt quite right to him, no matter how many times he did it. If Celestia had wanted Caballus to fly, he figured he would have been born a pegasus. He poked his head into the cockpit. "How soon can we land, Fyz?"

Just such a pegasus, one wearing a rust colored robe that matched his oil-smeared coat glanced back. "Relax Cab. We're only a few minutes from HQ now." Fyzzix, a Magosus of the Adequus Mequestricus, responded in the somewhat nasal voice that was actually projected through the speaker-box affixed to his neck. Most Meq-priests underwent similar "improvements" as they rose through the ranks of their mysterious order, slowly replacing their organic systems with stronger mechanical ones. By now, one of Fyzzix's eyes and both his hind legs were entirely metal.

Caballus let out a resigned sigh. "Sorry, Fyz. You know how I get."

Fyzzix smiled back with the fleshy half of his face and replied without even moving his lips. "I *do* know how you get. I know that no matter how many times I don't crash the balloon, you'll always remind me of the once or twice that I have."

It was Caballus's turn to smile now. "It was actually three times. The first time that rampaging hydra dragged us down. And the second time you rammed that hijacked snow-delivery cart, and the damage caused us to crash-land into the main snow manufactorum of Nimbostrata."

"Those last two still only counts as one crash though," Fyzzix said with a chuckle. He returned his gaze to the balloon's instruments and a mechanical claw emerged from beneath his robes, giving Caballus a dismissive wave. "Now I've got to begin the Rites of Safe Landing, so stop distracting me, or we might all experience crash number three... or four, if you're determined to maintain that delusion."

Caballus returned to the passenger compartment in better spirits. Fyz had always had a knack for easing his nerves, almost as well as he rattled them with his reckless flying. The joke often told was that his cutie mark, a winged wrench, meant that Fyzzix's special talent was fixing the vehicles that he himself had damaged with his over-enthusiasm. It was a charge the pegasus always laughed off, but never denied.

The compartment he returned to was mostly just a space that contained all the team's gear and had a few seats to spend the ride in. Roughshod was dozing off to one side, and Mystic was sitting in the far back corner, staring out the window.

For his part, Roughshod seemed quite comfortable. The pony was reclining in his seat, head down and snoring a little. An old Guard habit, he would always tell Caballus, of getting sleep when and wherever he could in the field.

Every aspect of his appearance was similarly practical. His mane was a darker brown than his coat, and trimmed short to prevent enemies from grabbing it in a brawl. His hooves, despite his name, were all shod securely with horseshoes designed for grip and durability, and custom fit for his large proportions. Caballus glanced down at Roughshod's cutie mark, a shield with a star on it, and remarked to himself how it had once again proved fitting on their latest outing.

He wasn't going to wake the former soldier just yet, but somehow Roughshod always knew when they were on final approach, and he sat right up.

"We almost there, boss?"

"You're awake, aren't you?" replied the Inquisipony. "When we arrive, I'll be delivering my report and receiving orders from Lord Banehoof in person. You're in charge of resupply while I'm gone. Have Mystic help you."

"You got it, boss." Roughshod looked back over his shoulder and grinned at Mystic. "You hear that, Sweet Pea? I'm in charge."

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Which means I'll be doing all the lifting. You know, just because I can lift things with magic doesn't mean it's

easy.” The younger unicorn had never cared for the nickname Roughshod had given her based on her coloring, so naturally he ribbed her with it at every opportunity. Her irritation was further expressed by impatiently blowing away the lime green forelock that hung past her horn, between her eyes. It was a highlight that ran up into the otherwise dark blue bun she tightly kept her mane in, and it was symbolic of her magical talents, in a way; precise, deliberate and carefully maintained, but betraying something... caged, something straining to escape. Many enemies of the Princess had mistaken the slender, frail-looking pony for helpless. But the sparkling lightning bolt on her flank spoke to the swiftness with which she brought them Celestia’s justice.

“I expect you both to be lifting. We won’t be staying in HQ for very long.” Caballus turned his attention out the window, toward the cityscape below. Great spires of polished white rose above the drab sprawl, remnants of a more glorious age standing defiant against the encroachments of the modern. The edge of the urban area stretched nearly to the horizon, dotted with parks and ponds and spacious squares in some parts, and crowded high with tall buildings in others. Above the bustling streets, the sky was thick with pegasus traffic. Carts, chariots and balloons of every shape and size ferried goods to and from the city below to their floating communities that drifted above the city, and off to the far corners of Equestria. Hippopolis had been one of the shining jewels of Equestrian trade and industry for hundreds of years, and was the regional capital of the Palomyna Sector.

Her Solar Majesty banked as it began its descent. One of the smaller towers started to loom larger in the windows. It stood out from its brethren, not for its size, but because instead of being pristine marble, it was obsidian black. The Friendquisition favored an intimidating presence. Soon, one of the large landing pads on the top of the tower filled the whole view, and the prop-balloon came to a jolting halt on its surface. A dislodged crate tipped over, and would have landed on Caballus, had Roughshod not yanked him away by the collar of his leather armor.

“Sorry!” Fyzzix yelled from the cockpit. “Must have been... the wind... or something.”

The ramp lowered and the team disembarked. Crews scurried around the craft, checking various systems and instruments. Fyzzix was already

leading a few other Meq-adepts in maintenance rituals. His apprentice, a maroon Tech-pegasus named Wingnut rushed out to greet him. Roughshod conferred with a quartermaster over a list of needed supplies, and Mystic was already levitating the necessary crates across the loading area. Caballus descended into the tower alone.

The polished, black, stone corridors echoed with every fall of Caballus's hooves. Even though it was smaller than many other such buildings in Hippopolis, this tower was still immense. Had he not memorized the structure's layout in his years of training here, he would have been hopelessly lost after only a few minutes.

Finally he entered a large, vaulted hall. On either side stood grand statues of Friendquisitionary heroes and murals depicting their legendary exploits. All of it was inlaid with gems and precious metals, so that the dark walls gave way to a bright, glittering display. The Hall of The Honored still filled Caballus with awe no matter how many times he saw it. He had an appointment to keep, however, so he couldn't afford to stop and admire the sight, as much as he would have liked to.

At the far end of the Hall stood two gigantic doors displaying ancient symbols that marked them as the Friendquisitionary Court. Just as Caballus approached, they opened with a loud groan. Another Inquisipony walked out, flanked by two guards who were dragging another thrashing pony with them. Caballus nodded to his colleague as they passed one another, and didn't even spare a glance to the ragged, gibbering prisoner. He didn't need to know the wretch's verdict or sentence. If you're brought before the Tribunal, you're already guilty. Caballus stepped through the doors.

The chamber was circular, ringed with seats like an amphitheater and lit with flickering torches. Opposite the entrance stood the Tribunal bench, and atop it, towering over the Inquisipony, sat the judges.

The pony in the center seat scrutinized Caballus below with the one eye not covered by a patch. His ancient gray hide, crisscrossed with scars, wrinkled as he squinted. After a moment, he spoke. "Ah, Caballus, my faithful student, there you are. It is good to see you again."

With a smile, Caballus bowed. "And you as well, Lord Banehoof."

“No need for formalities, Caballus. You know I have no patience for them.” Banehoof chuckled and waved his hoof. Then he cleared his throat, saying, “but we must get to business. I trust you have something to report?”

“Yes, Lord.” He glanced toward the judges on either side of his mentor, addressing them with courteous nods. “Lord Inquisipony Stallius. Lady Inquisipony Vigilant. As you know, I’ve been following the trail of the Cheat-worm infestation since they were discovered by the Canterlot Guard. I may have finally found a lead to their source.”

“Yes...” Banehoof said, “the Cheat-worms are a grave affair. It’s serious enough whenever they turn up, but to slip past our defenses? Only stopped on the doorstep of Holy Canterlot just weeks before the Summer Sun Celebration? It’s most troubling.”

“Indeed,” Lord Stallius agreed. “When we received your preliminary field report, we did some searching of our own about this ‘merchant.’”

“And you’ve found something?” asked the Inquisipony.

“As a matter of fact, we have,” replied Lady Vigilant. Her horn glowed softly in the dim chamber, and several scrolls deftly floated into the space in front of Caballus. “There’s been a recent surge of activity in the illicit animal market. It seems the individual believed to be largely responsible matches his description. We believe he’s a Rogue Trader, one who is slipping through our border patrols to collect exotic creatures from the Everfree to sell them here in Equestria.”

“Unfortunately,” said Banehoof, grimly “that’s all we have. Whoever he is, his tracks are well covered.”

“Forgive me lord,” Caballus ventured, skimming the scrolls before him, “but isn’t that a task better suited for a member of the Ordo Zoonos? Dangerous and foreign beasts are their jurisdiction, not the Hereticolt’s.”

“Normally, yes. But much of the information we’ve gathered has been from intercepted communications between cells of a cult I believe you’re rather familiar with...”

“The Children...” the Inquisipony said when he reached the end of the report. “So... they’ve returned?”

Banehoof nodded. “Indeed they have. According to intelligence gathered by Hereticolt and Zoonos agents, the Children are active in Equestria once again.”

“It’s been so long...” Caballus was still struggling with the revelation. It had been decades since the Friendquisition had vanquished that vile cult, putting its members to flight and its squalid nests to the torch. “Are you positive it’s them? I was sure we had destroyed them last time...”

“All evidence points to it,” said Lord Stallius. “This time, the Holy Ordos will need to be more thorough.”

“We defeated them once, by the Princess’s grace,” Lord Banehoof said with a glimmer of the old warrior’s fire in his eye, “and by Her grace we’ll do it again.”

“Yes. Of course, Lord. By Her grace.” Caballus bowed again, turned, and left through the Court’s gigantic doors.

“What do you mean, ‘the Children are back!?!’”

Roughshod paced the flight deck back and forth, fuming.

“I mean exactly what I said. The reports indicate that the Children are once again operating cult cells on Equestrian soil.”

“No!” Roughshod reared up and stamped the floor. The impact left a spider-web fracture in the stone. “They can’t be back! After all we did? After all *they* did? They were gone for good, you said that.”

“You know I wish this weren’t true,” Caballus said, trying to calm his friend down, “that it was some sort of mistake, or a rumor drummed up by some two-bit amateurs trying to make a name for themselves. Celestia knows we get that sort of false alarm all the time. But the intel is solid. They’re back.”

“Forgive my ignorance,” Mystic interrupted, “but whose children?”

“Before your time, kid,” said Roughshod, “Something that should have stayed in the past, dead and buried.”

“The ‘Children of Liberation’ were- *are* a heretical cult that Roughshod and I had a hoof in purging several years before we met you.”

“So?” she said, “I bet you’ve dealt with tons of cults. It is your job after all. What’s so special about this one?”

Caballus sighed. “I suppose you’re too young to remember the Skyroan Crisis. The Children, as far as we know, started off like any other cult. The Hereticolt would uncover an isolated coven and stamp it out, only for another to crop up elsewhere, as they often do. But around the time I was elevated to the rank of Inquisipony, something changed. They became better equipped, better trained, and better organized. Isolated attacks became a full blown campaign of terror and insurrection across the entire sector. At the height of the fighting, Governor-Mayor Skyros declared himself independent of Equestria, and most of the CDF followed him. It took the entire Ordos Palomyna, five regiments of Equestrian Guard, and three companies of Apple Fists to restore order. We later learned that the Governor-Mayor and his advisors had been funding and supplying the Children for quite some time before they made their move.”

“Fat lot of good it did him, though,” Roughshod snorted.

Caballus nodded in agreement. “Lord Banehoof personally delivered the pie to Skyros’s face that ended the mad affair. We spent countless weeks tracking down every last heretic who’d taken part. Once they make their move and reveal themselves, cults don’t tend to last long. But someone must have escaped, hidden under some rock, and now they’ve returned to rebuild the Children.”

“But without a benefactor like Skyros...” Mystic ventured, “the Children can’t be that much of a threat anymore, right?”

“I would dearly like to think that, but we won’t underestimate them again. We’ve got a lead on the Cheat-worm dealer, and with some luck, he’ll lead us to whoever is employing him.”

Roughshod turned to head back to *Her Solar Majesty*. “Then what are we waiting for?”

“Actually, we won’t be taking the ship. Too big and too conspicuous. Besides, we’re not going that far.”

Chapter 3

If Hippopolis could be said to have a slum, though nopony in the Governor-Mayor's office would ever admit to such a thing, the Stabledregs were it.

The buildings weren't as tall as elsewhere in the city, but their decaying, ramshackle edifices still managed to give its streets a feeling of claustrophobia. Said streets were usually teeming with the lower classes that lived there during the day, but roaming them after dark was considered by most to be a categorically bad idea. The poorly lit alleys that crisscrossed the neighborhood were notorious for accumulating filth of both the normal and criminal varieties.

Because it lay downwind of the city's ground-based industry, the Stabledregs were also perpetually shrouded in thick smog. Urban legends claimed that the Weather Service pegasi had once tried to clear the skies above the crowded tenements, but even they had choked on the gloomy haze and had given up. Nowadays, nopony even bothered. It was just something they had to live with, and a hacking, smoky cough known as "Dragon's Snore" was an all too common malady among residents.

Caballus and his team picked their way through the crowds. According to the Friendquisition's informants, their Rogue Trader had been spotted several times in this area in recent weeks, meeting suspicious individuals and conducting business of doubtful legality. Even so, it was beginning to seem like an impossible task. One pony was a needle, and the 'dregs were a formidable haystack.

"We've been out here all afternoon," complained Roughshod, "and not a single pony has seen anypony that looks like our guy."

Caballus sighed. "I was afraid of this. In places like these, folks won't answer questions from strangers. They all assume we're after somepony in trouble with the law, a Guild, or a rival gang. Even if they *have* seen him, they don't want to get involved."

With another sigh, the Inquisipony turned and headed back down the street. "Come on," he said, "let's find somewhere to stay tonight so we can regroup and try again tomorrow."

Roughshod followed, but after a few steps, Caballus paused and looked back to find Mystic standing still, staring up into the air.

"Our Rogue Trader supposedly trades in exotic animals, right?" she asked, without looking away from whatever it was she saw.

Caballus followed her gaze skyward "Yes, that's right..."

"Then maybe *that* can lead us to him." She pointed to a tiny orange-red splotch above them.

Caballus reached into his saddlebag, and pulled out his magnoculars. They stained to pierce the smog and give a clear picture. The shape was roughly the size of a pegasus, but its wingspan appeared far larger. "What is that?"

"I think it's a phoenix," was Mystic's matter-of-fact reply.

At this, Roughshod started to chuckle, but his laughs soon turned into a coughing fit. After a few moments, he cleared his throat. "How do you know it's a phoenix, Sweet Pea? You've never seen one. There are probably only a handful of ponies outside of the Princess's Palace who've ever seen one. And if our guy could afford one, he wouldn't be skulking around a dump like this."

"You underestimate how much money there is to be made on the black animal market, my friend. And a neighborhood like this is the best place for illegal deals; they're easy to hide and unlikely to be reported." Caballus put his magnoculars away and took off after the distant shape. "It's the best lead we've got. Let's try not to lose it."

For nearly an hour, the team managed to stay on the bird's winding trail. All the while, Caballus was sure they had managed to do so undetected, until the phoenix suddenly dove like a comet behind the skyline.

“Do you think it saw us?” Roughshod asked. His voice was almost a cautious whisper, as though he was afraid the phoenix was somehow listening in.

Caballus shrugged. “I don’t know, but it landed somewhere in this block. We should take a look around.” The team proceeded around the corner, inspecting the buildings until they came across one shop that stood out. Unlike the nearly every other structure in the Stabledregs, this storefront didn’t appear to be in any significant state of disrepair, nor was it caked in soot. The paint was new, the windows were clean, and the sign out front read “Ver Kaufer’s Fine Pet Emporium.”

As the trio entered the store, a yellow pony behind the register jumped to alertness. He was clothed in a dark blue dress uniform, trimmed with yellow epaulettes and gold buttons. His flowing, sky-blue mane was topped by a broad musketeer hat, sporting an orange-red plume. The thickly mustachioed smile of a consummate salespony greeted them. “Velcome, my friends, to my establishment. I am Tier Ver Kaufer, at your service.”

He appeared to be from the nearby Lipizzan sector, Caballus guessed, by his name, style and accent. Yellow pony, flamboyant attitude, swashbuckling outfit; he fit the profile both Seedy and the Zoonos agents had given.

“That has to be him,” Caballus whispered to the others “I want both of you to search for evidence and keep an eye out for any other exits. I’ll keep him busy.” The pair broke off and Caballus approached Tier.

“Is zer something I can help you und your friends with?” asked the yellow pony hopefully.

Caballus returned the smile. “Oh, they’ll just be browsing. That one is my niece, you see, and for her birthday I’ve promised to buy her a pet.”

“Vell, you’ve come to ze right place! I have personally collected ze widest selection of animals from across Equestria. All of zem healthy, well trained und well cared for.”

"I can certainly see that." Looking around, Caballus noted the variety of animal life the shopkeeper had on display. Birds of all kinds sat in cages of all sizes. Cats and dogs watched the ponies intently from their kennels, as did countless ferrets, rabbits, mice and other cute, furry rodents. On the back wall, he even noticed separate containers for lizards, snakes, frogs and the like.

Tier led Caballus on a leisurely tour through the aisles of pets, food and accessories, elaborating on each in turn as they passed it. Despite the salespony's obvious passion for the pet trade, Caballus found his attention wandering. That is, until Mystic interrupted.

"Uncle," she said, playing along with the Inquisipony's cover story she overheard earlier, "I can't find anything I like. You said I could have something extraordinary, that nopony else has! All *these* pets are *boring*!" Mystic whined like a spoiled aristocrat, a brat long accustomed to getting her own way.

The yellow salespony seemed absolutely mortified at the allegation. Mystic's acting had certainly improved, Caballus remarked to himself.

He leaned in close to Tier. "You see, my friend; I was referred specifically to this shop by an associate of mine. He told me I would be able to treat my niece to something especially unique if I came here. Are you not the Rogue Trader he described?"

"Of course I am!" the pride-wounded pony retorted. "Ze one und only Tier Ver Kaufer, third heir to ze Ver Kaufer Trade House, ze most respected guild in ze entire Lipizzan Sector!"

"Then may I see your Warrant of Trade?" Caballus asked politely.

Tier deflated. "My... my what? My varrant? Oh... um... of course... Just a moment." He fumbled around a bit with the pockets on his coat, finally fishing a small piece of paper out of one. "Zere you are," he said, handing it promptly over to Caballus.

The Inquisipony scrutinized the document. Tier was indeed a Rogue Trader of the Ver Kaufer House, but it wasn't a Warrant that Caballus held. It was a Letter of Marque, a much less empowering license issued by the

Admanestratum, this particular one granted only for trade *within* his home sector. Tier was doing business outside of the lands he was permitted to, another likely reason for such an otherwise affluent pony to be hiding in the Stabledregs.

“Alright,” Caballus said, handing the paper back after a moment. It would have been obvious to anypony who often dealt with Rogue Traders that Tier was trying to pass off his inferior papers as the ones he needed, hoping Caballus didn’t know the difference. If he was third heir as he said, the current head of the Ver Kaufer Trade House, and not Tier, would hold the true Warrant.

But the Inquisipony was impersonating a blue-blooded pony from the city’s social elite; wealthy and privileged, but sheltered, and typically ignorant of matters concerning faraway places. So he acted the part and pretended to be fooled. “You’re in luck, young lady. I’m sure a pony of such skill and pedigree will be able to provide any pet your heart desires. And of course...”

Roughshod produced a sack of coins from his saddlebag. It jingled and drooped heavily in his teeth before he put it back.

“... money won’t be an object,” Caballus finished.

Tier, believing the three had bought his lie and were now well-paying customers, smiled broadly. “Certainly. Ze lady has a fine eye for animals, I see. And such exquisite tastes would not be satisfied without an equally exquisite specimen, true? Zen allow me to show you to ze more ‘exclusive’ merchandise.”

At an excited trot, Tier ushered the trio through the door behind the register. The room was dark but for an open skylight. “Vogel!” Tier called out, “we have guests!”

In an instant, there was a blinding light. A fireball with wings spiraled down from the rafters, lighting lanterns all around the room as it went. Finally its flames died down enough to land on Tier’s back.

“May I introduce to you my own pet und assistant, Feuervogel.”

The red, orange and yellow-plumed bird bowed gracefully, and then flew back up to its perch, now visible near the skylight.

“He is quite impressive, is he not?” beamed Tier. The team continued to stare for a moment longer, unable to conceal their amazement at the mythical bird. “Unfortunately, he is not for sale. He was... a gift, and I am quite fond of him.”

A gift? Tier may be part of a powerful trade family, Caballus thought, but even they would be paupers compared to the kind of individual who could just *give away* a phoenix.

“Not a problem. It was a pleasure just to have met him. Now... if you would excuse me,” the Inquisipony said, turning back toward the door, “there is other business I need to attend to for a moment. I expect you will have found something you like by the time I get back.” The message to Roughshod and Mystic was clear: keep Tier busy.

“Of course, sir. You have my guarantee zat ze lady will leave happy,” Tier assured him once again, and directed the other two through the twisting maze of crates and cages in the small warehouse tucked behind his storefront.

“Zis way, you will see ze adolescent manticore,” their host said, as though they could miss the carriage-sized monster pacing its cage up ahead. “Note ze clean teeth und shiny coat. She is sometimes... a bit moody, but she is sure to give any rivals you might invite over to dinner quite a scare!”

Ignoring it, Mystic stopped at an open-topped crate where the heads of six puppies yipped with enthusiasm over the box’s edge. When she looked in, to her visible surprise there were only two bodies between them, three of the heads on each.

Tier chuckled at her reaction. “No reason to be alarmed, my dear. Zey are perfectly healthy. Ze breed displays natural aptitude as guard dogs, if you were to require one...”

“They are quite adorable...” the younger pony conceded, “but I already have a capable guard,” she said, indicating Roughshod.

Tier thought for a moment. “Aha! If it is something cute you desire, zen allow me to show you ze modest herd of Jackalope I have managed to breed in captivity,” he said, leading them deeper into the storeroom.

Chapter 4

Back near the entrance, Caballus had not left, but rather was investigating the rest of the warehouse alone, away from Tier's attention. Stack after stack and crate upon crate turned up nothing, just litter and pet food. He scoured the aisles, looking for something, anything to connect the Rogue Trader to the Children or the Cheat-worm sale. But all the supplies were frustratingly mundane.

Beginning to fear he might be missed, Caballus was about to turn back empty-hoofed. But as he did, he inadvertently kicked something. There, all alone on the floor, lay a single apple. A crisp, red, shiny, perfect-looking apple. His mouth watered. They'd been so busy investigating all morning that he'd skipped lunch, something he was suddenly reminded of by an insistent growl. And if Tier had just left this single apple lying around, surely he wouldn't...

No, he thought, something wasn't right. Caballus was never one to think with his stomach. He tore his hungry gaze from the apple, and tried to find where it had come from. Scanning the floor, the Inquisipony noticed what looked like hoof prints, where somepony had recently disturbed the thin layer of dust by passing through. The trail led to a rack fixed on the wall, empty but for one pet leash hanging on it.

Going with his instincts, Caballus pulled on the leash. With the click of some heavy mechanism, the wall behind it swung away to reveal a hidden door. "Now we're getting somewhere," he mumbled to himself with a smile.

Beyond the door was another large room. The air was musty and stale, holding an odor that took some effort to ignore. Along the walls were several large vats, each as wide around as a small swimming pool, and taller than two ponies. Seeing nopony else around, Caballus climbed the stairs that jutted from the nearest vat to peek over its rim.

It was filled with apples, all of them just as ripe and delicious as the one he had found outside. A pang of hunger struck him, almost like a real

blow to his gut. He wanted one, so very badly. Just one, out of the whole pile, couldn't possibly be missed, could it?

But even as he reached out, Caballus was again struck by a pervading sense of wrongness. Pulling back, the words of his mentor came to mind. Discipline and self-control, Banehoof often told him, are the armor of the soul. It was advice that had served him well on long and difficult missions before, and he wasn't about to do something stupid for mere food.

The Inquisipony got down, still needing much of his willpower to do so, and picked another vat. He silently hoped this one didn't contain any more of the tempting fruit. Even with discipline, a pony could only take so much after all. But there was only one way to find out, so he lifted his face over the edge.

The stench was overpowering, nearly throwing him off the platform. The space reeked of spoiled meat and decaying plant matter. When he had finished coughing, Caballus held his hoof over his nose to look inside again. The whole surface rippled and undulated with the wriggling mass of Cheat-worms it contained. It was horrifying. And it was beautiful.

Caballus stood transfixed by the sight, unwilling to continue looking, but unable to look away. The unsettling feeling grew the longer he stared, making him feel faint, and sick to his stomach in a way that had nothing to do with their abominable stink. All the apples had been contaminated, infested. How could he have failed to realize that before?

"Admiring my little ones, are we?"

The sound of another voice was enough to break whatever hold the writhing mass had on Caballus, and he expected to see Tier catching him in the act. But instead, it was somepony else entirely.

The voice's owner was a pale green pony, a sickly and emaciated thing. His skin drooped and hung over his visible skeleton, and the pallid coat was spotted with lesions, sores and patches of mange. Whatever mane he might have had before appeared to have long since fallen out, as if left a ruin by some terrible war with the army of fleas and flies that yet remained. But this newcomer's most prominent feature was a shiny,

dripping layer of mucus issuing from his warty nose. He snorted repeatedly, in what seemed a constant but pointless struggle to keep it in.

Caballus balked as he realized the full extent of this new pony's repugnance. His stomach wretched again, bringing him to his knees on the verge of vomiting. In all his years as an Inquisipony, he had fought heretics of every stripe, degenerates given to any number of dark powers or unseemly corruptions. But none had ever been like this.

"I often come here just to watch them dance. The same spell that makes their apples irresistible doesn't wear off once they hatch, you know. It's still quite mesmerizing, isn't it?" the pony rambled in his stuffy, nasal voice, as if unaware of the effect his presence was having on his guest. "But where are my manners?"

The prospect that this pony might approach Caballus to introduce himself threw the Inquisipony into a momentary panic. "Stay back!" he groaned, shakily getting back to his feet. "This whole place is... is... an affront to The Princess. And I'm shutting it down."

The other pony frowned, a mildly perplexed and disappointed expression crossing his milky eyes. "Oh, you must be the Inquisipony. Are you sure you want to do that? We could be such good friends instead. My name is Sniffles." He smiled and took a few steps forward, extending his hoof.

Caballus recoiled from it. "I said stay back, you filthy monster! You're clearly involved with this illegal and heretical operation, and as much as I'd like to put you down right here," he said, drawing a pie from beneath his overcoat, "I have to bring you in to be questioned."

"So you don't want to be friends?" Sniffles pouted, but then shrugged. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Closed-minded Equestrians, so quick to judge."

"Yes, it will be quick to judge you guilty of heresy, I can already tell. Then I can burn this whole accursed place clean of your taint and find out who's truly responsible."

Sniffles' mood darkened. "No pony threatens my babies," he said.

Caballus heard a loud *fwoosh!* coming from behind him, and he instinctively ducked. A searing gout of fire passed just inches over his head, singeing his hat to a crisp. Then, just as suddenly, there was a piercing screech.

Across the warehouse — after just finishing a lengthy, mostly one-sided discussion about the differences between dragons and the drakes and wyverns on display — Tier, Mystic and Roughshod all took notice.

“Vogel?” Tier’s eyes darted back and forth in the direction of the scream, sales pitch instantly abandoned.

“That was probably just the sound of our cover being blown,” Roughshod replied, and before Tier could realize what was meant by that, the larger pony tackled him against a row of shelves.

“As a duly appointed Throne Agent, I’m placing you under arrest.” He gave Tier an extra shove for emphasis. “So just sit tight and don’t do anything stupid.”

Tier went pale. “Th-throne A-agent? Zen z-zat means...”

“Indeed,” said Mystic, “Friendquisition. And as soon as the Inquisipony returns...”

Before she could finish the threat, Feuervogel came arching over the crates and slammed into Roughshod. Had he not been holding the phoenix’s master at the time, he probably would have been incinerated by the enraged bird. Even so, the intensity of the heat sent him to the ground, rolling in pain. Mystic rushed to his side.

Finding his footing, Tier took off toward the front entrance. He galloped from cage to cage, flinging open the latches on every one he passed to cover his escape.

“Gah! Forget me,” Roughshod yelled when Mystic tried helping him to his feet. “Don’t let that scumbag get away!”

The unicorn nodded, but as she made to pursue, her path was barred by Feuervogel. Every flap of its wings seemed to fan its own magical flames, turning the passageway into an impassible inferno.

Horn glowing, Mystic narrowed her eyes. Several nearby pens and cages had water bowls and bottles for their occupants, and these began to levitate and swirl in the air above her. One by one, she flung them at the phoenix.

Feuervogel dodged this way and that, unable to get any closer to the ponies. But every swoop he made to avoid the water ignited whatever he passed over. In a matter of moments, half the room was ablaze, and the other half soon to follow. All of the released animals were now running wild in panic, adding to the pandemonium.

One of the thrown water bowls did manage to douse the phoenix, and his feathers guttered and sizzled. The bird shrieked and searched the room frantically for his master, until he realized Tier had already fled. With a mighty flap of his wings, Feuervogel took off like a rocket through the skylight, leaving a pillar of flame and smoke in his wake.

By now, Roughshod was back on his feet, and the two were trying to navigate their way out the burning building. Several times they were nearly trampled by some of the larger creatures, or crushed by falling crates and burning debris. The thick, black smoke began to obscure their vision and fill their lungs.

"We've got to get our flanks out of here before this whole place collapses!" Roughshod yelled over the roaring flames.

Mystic looked around. "But what about Caballus? And all these animals?"

"I'm sure the boss is fine. And all these critters are tainted anyway. Let 'em burn."

"No, I won't leave them. They're still living creatures, and besides, they're evidence." Mystic pointed her horn toward a nearby wall. With a grunt of exertion and an incandescent flash, the barrier was blown open by a shock-wave of concussive force, creating a large, obvious exit.

The blast also rattled everything in their immediate area. Some shelves beside them gave way and in an instant Roughshod was buried under a pile of kibbles, cans of cat food and bird seed.

“Shod!” Mystic cried. “Hang on; I’m going to get you out of there!” The unicorn dug at the mound for all she was worth, but she could barely even breathe, and there had to be nearly a ton of animal feed on top of him. She’d never be able to get him out in time. As if to illustrate her fears, a burning rafter swung down, almost crushing her as well. She had to think of something, fast.

There was one thing she could do, she realized. But it was risky.

“Roughshod? If you can hear me, brace yourself!” The unicorn took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Her horn glowed and hummed with power. An unearthly wind whipped up around her and the air crackled as it saturated with magic. Sweat beaded on Mystic’s face. She groaned and gritted her teeth.

It was a simple thing to make something explode. Many inexperienced unicorns trying to perform their first spells often had the results, quite literally, blow up in their faces. It was the “not exploding” part that took time to master. But something about it was just so natural to Mystic. She had been able to detonate small objects with a mere thought since she was a little filly.

This was different, though. She couldn’t be careless, couldn’t simply throw the magic around like a toy. She had to concentrate. One mistake, one second too early or late, one inch to one side or the other, and she was just as likely to vaporize the friend she was trying to save as the massive weight crushing him.

With a silent prayer to the Princess, Mystic aimed her spell. Her vision blurred as the energy drained from her and gathered at the tip of her horn. First her legs, then her whole body, began trembling with fatigue. Her head started to spin, and she thought she heard voices on the edge of her hearing, whispering to her. Finally she released it.

A jagged arc of green lightning impacted the pile of dried pet food. The blast shattered the cages and glass display pens in the pet store, freeing the remaining animals. It splintered every box in a five meter radius. And it flung Mystic's limp body through the air. Her world went white, and then there was nothing.

The first thing Mystic became aware of was the painful throbbing in her head. It took her a moment to realize that the fact she had a headache meant she was awake. She attempted opening her bleary eyes, only to be blinded by the light directly above her. Covering her eyes with a hoof, she tried sitting up.

"Easy there, kiddo. Just lie back. That was quite a stunt you pulled. Took a lot out of you."

"Rough... Roughshod? Is that you?"

"Well it damn sure ain't the Governor-Mayor," the brown pony laughed.

Mystic laughed weakly too, until it hurt in her chest a little too much. Once her eyes adjusted, she looked around, recognizing the interior compartment of *Her Solar Majesty*. She was in her simple cot back on board the airship.

"And you're... alright?" She was hesitant to ask, lest he confirm the terrible damage she imagined she caused him with her spell.

Roughshod laughed again. "Oh, I'm a little crispy, but that's from the fire, not you. No, that little trick of yours seemed to work like a charm." He took her hoof in his. "You got me out in one piece, kiddo. Thanks."

"What about Caballus?" she asked.

"Right here, Mystic." The Inquisipony appeared next to Roughshod, smiling. "I even got to see that 'little trick' when I came looking for you two. Very impressive."

“What... what happened?”

“I found the Cheat-worm breeding vats in Tier’s warehouse,” the Inquisipony explained. “That and I met a rather unsavory heretic guarding it, too. The phoenix discovered me, tried to torch me but missed, and left to warn Tier about you two. Then, from the sound of it, he set the place on fire.”

Mystic felt a pang of guilt. “It was my fault. I just started throwing things at him, and... and... I blew out the wall and... it was all my fault”

Roughshod placed a reassuring hoof on her shoulder. “No, it wasn’t, Sweet Pea. That crazy bird was trying to destroy the evidence. He would have done it anyway. And you stopped him.”

“Evidence? You mean the animals? What happened to them? Are they all right?”

“Almost all of them were rounded up by the fire department. A few of the larger ones couldn’t be contained until the Ordo Zoonos arrived, but it seems all of them have since been accounted for.”

Roughshod grinned. “There were enough freaks and mutants poached from the Everfree to get Tier put away for at least a few lifetimes. That is, if we can catch him.”

“So he got away?”

“Yes,” Came Caballus’s blunt reply, “he did, and his accomplice as well. The responders were too busy fighting the fire and catching animals to search for him. But we think we know where he’s going. After he left the scene, Tier was spotted at Hippopolis Central Station. He’s fleeing, so he’s probably going to ground somewhere he’s operated out of before, somewhere far away from strong Equestrian authority. And there’s only one place like that you can still reach by train, and where you can also catch wild Jackalope like the ones he had...”

The train came to its stop at a dusty station, the end of its line. The sun beat down unrelentingly on the wooden platform, and the air was stiflingly hot. The platform itself was old and worn, suffering from years of abuse and neglect, and fairly indicative of the town it serviced, as well as the welcome any newcomers were likely to receive there.

The brakes finally released with a pneumatic hiss, and the metal doors parted. Tier was tossed unceremoniously through them onto the ground. Behind him, Sniffles also disembarked, shambling off the train.

“Ah, my esteemed associate, Mister Ver Kaufer,” said the pony at whose feet Tier had landed. “I’m guessing something went wrong?”

Tier moaned and looked up through a swollen black eye. “It-it was ze Friendquisition! Zey tricked me, und... und zey attacked me und my animals. It was dreadful!”

“Indeed it was,” the pony replied, a hint of mocking in his voice. “And I’m to assume the Inquisipony is on his way here right now?”

Sniffles nodded.

A smile cracked the pony’s lips, revealing a mouth bristling with fangs. “Then we’ll have to prepare a surprise for him. Oh, I do so love planning surprises,” he said, already walking away. “You can do whatever you like with this one, Sniffles. I’ve no further use for him.” Then he paused, looking back. “And Tier? Welcome back to Applemattox.”

Chapter 5

“Welcome to Applemattox.” Fyzzix called from the cockpit. *Her Solar Majesty* had just crossed into what was vaguely considered the township’s limits. The Magosus checked his instruments again; they and the moon were the only sources of light in the cockpit. Fyzzix didn’t really need either of them, however, as he was always directly interfaced with the craft while he piloted. The data fed through his uplink cable directly into the back of his head told him more than his eyes could ever hope to. “According to the most recent records available, there isn’t anything resembling an aerodrome for us to land in. What would you like me to do?”

“Cut your running lights,” Caballus said as he poked his head in. “Then set us down outside the town proper. After that, land somewhere out of sight, like a nearby ravine or valley, if you can find one. Keep a low profile. If we need you, we’ll call.”

Fyzzix didn’t even look up. “Scanning geography. Don’t take too long, Cab. My atmospheric data indicates this region is very prone to sandstorms.”

“Will that be a problem?”

“I’ll say!” Fyzzix laughed. “Have you ever gotten sand in your servos? I tripped and fell at the beach once, and my machine spirits still haven’t forgiven me for it. There aren’t enough Sacred Oils or Catechisms of Cleaning in all of Cloudsdale to get a sandy mechadendrite with cracked enviro-seals working again. Then again, if I were to remove the enviro-seals and replace them with a next generation anti-particulate casing...”

Ignoring the rambling Meq-priest, Caballus returned to the crew compartment with a smile, where the rest of the team was suiting up. The Inquisipony had been unable to relax at all on the three-day flight, and had spent the sleepless hours checking and rechecking his equipment to take his mind off his flying phobia. He couldn’t even keep himself occupied by looking out the windows, as there was nothing to see but stars.

Even if it were daytime, there would still be little point. The landscape surrounding Applemattox was scrub-country, an arid wasteland able to support cacti, rock farms and little else. The town itself was on fairly flat land, and it effectively marked the farthest reaches of Equestrian civilization on the edge of the Palomyna sector. Beyond it, the terrain became increasingly broken, the environment increasingly hostile, and the locals increasingly unpleasant. Mequestricus Explorators had taken surveys from the air of these "Rocklands," as they were known, but few ground expeditions had ever been launched, and fewer still had ever returned.

It strained Caballus's imagination to understand why anyone would choose to live in such a place. Roughshod's answer had suggested there would always be folks seeking a place to live free, away from the constricting social rules and oppressive toil of life in developed society. Mystic had bluntly called them all yokels and fugitives, as though only the foolish or desperate would willingly subsist in such a backwater. There might be some merit to both theories, Caballus pondered.

"So what's the plan, boss?" Roughshod asked, breaking the Inquisipony's reverie. "Find the local watering hole, ask the bartender about Tier, maybe pick a fight with some shady characters, and have Sweet Pea wait outside in case we need backup?" Fastening the last strap of his flak armor, he stretched and flexed until it sat just right on his frame, then slipped his overcoat over it.

"I always have to wait outside," Mystic pouted. She puffed her loose forelock in protest, and then swung her cloak over her saddlebags.

"Hey, if the plan works, why change it?" Roughshod countered with a smug grin.

Caballus raised an amused eyebrow. "I don't know, Roughshod. I think she did rather well back at the Pet Emporium. Maybe it's time to switch things up."

"Well... maybe something a little different, sure," the larger pony said, gazing out the nearest porthole at the mote of light on the horizon. It had been steadily growing as they neared Applemattox. But after a moment, Roughshod's eyes narrowed. "Wait a second..."

"I didn't mean that / wanted to wait outside!" Roughshod complained.

The three approached what could charitably be called a drinking establishment. As best they could tell, it was the largest and most popular of the half-dozen or so saloons in Applemattox, and was still barely more than a dirty hole-in-the-wall wedged between two storefronts on the main street. Bright lights and raucous music spilled out onto the streets all around it, and a sign hung over the swinging doors identified it as "The Hitching Post."

"Oh quit whining, you big baby," Mystic teased, "The Princess only knows how much smoother this will go without you looking for extra trouble. We might not even need backup this time." She knew that Roughshod relished his frequent opportunities to indulge in a little "self defense," and was annoyed at how he took for granted that her magic would always carry the day when a fight got out of his control.

"I wasn't whining," Roughshod grumbled under his breath. The kid was still too inexperienced, he thought. This wasn't some sleepy tavern in the heartland; it was a breeding ground for criminals and outlaws, the kind who shot first and didn't ask any questions at all.

Then again, he thought, she had been excelling in her combat training, having all but mastered the basic hoof-to-hoof techniques he'd taught her. Not to mention she was one of the more powerful unicorns he'd ever seen in a fight, in terms of raw abilities. *I'm sure the kid can handle it*, Roughshod decided, *and I'm just worrying too much. Maybe*. "You still sure about taking her in, Caballus?"

The Inquisipony had to stifle a chuckle. "We'll be fine, Roughshod." He had expected the big guy to get a little overprotective. It was his job after all, and it was those protective instincts that Caballus had come to rely on ever since Roughshod had joined his retinue. "It'll be good practice for her. Heck, maybe someday *I'll* get to wait outside and let *you* two get beat up by the bad guys."

Roughshod gave a begrudging shrug of concession as the three had arrived at the saloon doors. He leaned against the wall outside, where he was to stay until he was needed. "Watch your back in there, kiddo."

Mystic paused, and gave him a solemn nod. Then she followed Caballus through the swinging wooden doors.

The interior of the Hitching Post seemed surprisingly spacious to her, larger than the front of the saloon had suggested. Even still, that space was packed full, ponies surrounding every table and jammed into every nook and cranny. Mystic scanned the herd, trying to take in as much as she could about these frontier folks. As far as she could tell, they were all Earth ponies, without a single horn or wing in sight. Most were dressed either in the leather getups of ranch-hands or the plow harnesses of farmers. A few others had the slightly finer vests of businessponies, shopkeepers and bankers, while those huddled in the less well-lit corners bore bandoliers and bandannas. But almost all of them, nearly to a pony, were wearing those ridiculous Western-style hats.

The space in the room was equally crowded with noise. Ponies laughed and joked, all trying to talk over one another. Many tables played host to some form of card or dice game, where every hand revealed or die cast brought new cheers and moans. Some of the less well-mannered and more intoxicated of them hooted and hollered at the waitresses roaming the room, refilling their drinks. A piano somewhere in the back belted out a merry ragtime tune, adding to the cacophony and further drowning out individual voices. Several times, Caballus had to stop to make sure that Mystic was still behind him. She seemed a little... overwhelmed by all the bustle, bumping into chairs and tables as she followed his weaving course toward the bar on the back wall.

Mystic noticed Caballus's concerned look, and tried to compose herself. It wasn't the crowds or the noise that was bothering her, though. Those were nothing new. It was the glares she was receiving from ponies that she passed by. It seemed as if everypony she passed stared accusingly at her, making her more uncomfortable with every passing moment.

So distracted, she almost jumped when Caballus was suddenly standing next to her. "Put your hood up," he said, leaning in close enough to be heard over the din. "They're looking at your horn."

Mystic realized he was right, and quickly drew the hood of her cloak over her head. The unicorn spent so much time in the company of friends that she had forgotten how most of her kind were viewed by the Equestrian masses; with suspicion, sometimes even outright revulsion. Even in the cosmopolitan society of Hippopolis, she'd sometimes caught disapproving glances, and heard fretful whispers behind her back. Those she had learned to shrug off. But stories of "witch-hunts" by superstitious mobs in less-civilized areas started to worm into her thoughts, and her imagination did little help to ease her fears. She kept her head down, and tried to avoid drawing any more attention.

After what seemed to Mystic like an eternity, but was likely only a minute, the pair stood at the bar. It took a few moments — and eventually showing a few coins — for Caballus to get the bartender's attention, but the old grizzled pony nodded in their direction as he finished up pouring another group's round.

Another pony sauntered up to the bar just next to Caballus, between him and the bartender, and also signaled for service. The dusty, striped poncho he wore appeared to be draped over a couple saddlebags on his back. He was turned away from Caballus, so the Inquisipony couldn't see his face, but his neck was orange and the end of his tail that hung below the poncho's hem was striped black and red. The mane that wasn't covered by his black, felt gaucho hat had identical stripes.

Just as the bartender made his way over and Caballus prepared his questions, the new pony interrupted. "Excuse me partner," he said with the local drawl, "but I've got me a couple things I'd like to ask you."

The old barkeep gave the pony a leery look until a few coins appeared on the counter.

"I'm looking for somepony," the stranger said, just loud enough for Caballus to eavesdrop, "a Rogue Trader, yellow fella, been seen 'round these parts every so often."

The bartender's neutral expression didn't change, and though Caballus's interest had been violently piqued, neither did his. "There's lots of folk who pass through here. Some of 'em are yellow. Most don't say whether they're Rogue Traders or not."

“His name’s Tier,” the pony specified, “Tier Ver Kaufer. Mustache, fancy-pants Lipizzaner. I’ve got a powerful need to get a hold of him. Been told somepony around here might know how.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen him before.” The barkeep’s answer was given with a carefully practiced shrug. “Not for a while, though.”

The stranger dropped a small coin purse on the bar and slid it across. “Well, why don’t you go ask if anypony’s seen him lately?”

The older pony gave a slight nod, picked up the bag in his teeth and walked through the doors behind the bar. The stranger turned and leaned his back on the counter while he waited, and let his eyes wander the room. Caballus was surprised to see the pony looked quite young, probably only a few years older than Mystic. But the side of his face that had been turned away from the Inquisipony was revealed to be covered in scar tissue, and the left eye replaced by a large augmetic lens.

While the stranger quite literally scanned the crowded room, he suddenly paused and frowned. With a snap of his neck, he stared straight at Caballus, meeting his gaze as if he had sensed he was being watched. It startled Caballus, but he held in his surprise, betraying nothing to the stranger.

For a tense moment, both ponies glared at one another. The orange pony’s real eye narrowed, and his biotic one adjusted, the lens focusing on the figure before it. He took one step backward, then another. Tipping his hat to Caballus, he began to slowly, cautiously, make his way toward the front, giving the Inquisipony a wide berth. He glanced back every few paces, every time meeting Caballus’s unwavering stare.

“What are you-” Mystic began, having missed the entire silent exchange, but she was cut off when Caballus grabbed her. They were halfway across the saloon by the time he slowed down enough to explain.

“That pony, the orange one in the poncho. He was asking about Tier, and I want to know why. Come on.” The Inquisipony’s tone and face made it clear that he wanted to move quickly, without discussion.

“Which pony?” Mystic asked, looking around. Caballus turned back around to find the stranger gone. His eyes darted across the room, searching for him. There were so many ponies in the crowd, so much activity, he couldn’t discern any trace of his target. Finally, he glimpsed a striped pattern disappearing through the doors the barkeep had used behind the counter. The slippery bastard must have doubled back to take the employee exit, Caballus cursed to himself. And it had almost worked.

He pulled Mystic back to the bar, taking less and less care not to disturb the ponies they passed by as they played catch-up. With a bounding leap, he jumped the counter, to the dismay of the waitress behind it. “He went this way,” the Inquisipony told Mystic, who had just cleared the bar herself. The two barged through the doorway, entering the Hitching Post’s cramped kitchen. In seconds they dashed to the back door of the saloon and burst out into the night.

Chapter 6

Eyes and ears no longer accustomed to the dark and quiet of the outdoors, it took Caballus a moment to get his bearings. But once the ringing died a little, he picked out a voice.

“That’s him. That has to be the Inquisipony.”

In the gloom, Caballus could make out a number of figures surrounding himself and Mystic. As his vision adjusted, he could see they were a mismatched group of bandit-types, probably from some local gang. *But they aren’t looking at us*, he realized. *They haven’t even noticed us.* They were all looking at the stranger.

“Inquisipony?” The mysterious orange pony sounded as confused at this as Caballus was. “Now I reckon y’all have the wrong guy. I ain’t-“

“Shut yer trap!” the voice interrupted. It belonged to the apparent leader of the gang, a leathery stallion with a bushy mustache and the largest ten-gallon hat they’d seen yet. It was then that he finally noticed Caballus and Mystic standing in the doorway.

“Who’re they?” asked the desperado next to him.

“Witnesses,” he grinned. “Looks like we can add two more to the tally.”

In an instant, a dozen or so gangsters charged Caballus, Mystic and the stranger all at once. He reached into his greatcoat, but the nearest bandit tackled Caballus to the ground before he could draw a single pie. He bucked the assailant off, but another lifted him up and delivered a punch to his gut. Caballus doubled over, and then pushed back up, using his weight to knock the other pony off balance. The three tumbled to the ground, scuffling while still more closed in.

Only a few of the attackers broke off to surround Mystic, apparently assuming she was the easiest prey. But as they approached, her hood was

lifted up by the magical power gathering beneath it, revealing her glowing horn. The bandits hesitated, giving each other reluctant glances.

“What’s the matter?” she mocked. “Never seen magic before? Well then let me show you my favorite trick.” Mystic aimed her horn at the nearest gangster, and a blinding spear of lightning blasted the ground at his feet. It erupted in a geyser of gravel and dirt, throwing the terrified bandit high into the air. His comrades coughed on the dust at first, but they recoiled in horror when he landed in a limp heap in front of them.

“I swear if you yellow-bellies turn tail,” their leader bellowed, before any had a chance to do so, “it’ll be ten times as bad as that! You’ve all seen what happens to job-botchers. Now get in there and grab her!” And to Mystic’s surprise, they gulped down their fear and started advancing again. If that threat was still scarier than her magic, it was her turn to be afraid.

Even though Caballus and Mystic both had their hooves full, the stranger had it worse. Still mistaking him for the Inquisipony, he had gotten most of the gang’s attention, and was bearing the brunt of their attack. And yet somehow he seemed to be faring better than either of them. For every punch and kick thrown at him, there was a bob or weave to dodge it. Every bandit that grabbed him was flung away with ease. The orange pony delivered a sweeping kick, simultaneously ducking under a jab and tripping the pony that threw it. Then he sidestepped a tackle, the counter to which sent its owner stumbling into some of his companions. But this fight wasn’t over yet. There were still plenty of gangsters to take the place of each one he laid out.

By this time, Caballus was in poor shape. Two of the ruffians were pinning him down, while a third repeatedly stomped and kicked him. He flailed out with his legs, and caught the third right in the shin while he was rearing up again, making the pony howl in pain. Grabbing hold of the left bandit’s bandanna, the Inquisipony pulled him down into a solid head-butt, and then kicked the last one off to roll out from under the trio.

He was on his feet again, but he was panting, felt light-headed, and his vision was fuzzy. Caballus saw the bandits regrouping, but his confidence didn’t really sink until a huge brown figure came up from behind to join them. But as he blinked the spots from his eyes, he realized that it

was Roughshod, who proceeded to lift two of the bandits by the scruffs of their necks and bash them together.

“Nice of you to join us,” Caballus said.

“Just doing my job,” Roughshod cheerfully replied, picking up the other ganger, striking him senseless, and tossing him away like a sack of oats.

Caballus draped an arm around his friend for a moment to recover from his beating. “I didn’t get a chance to call for you. How did you know we needed backup?”

“Just got that feeling, I guess,” the stallion shrugged. “You know how my punching hoof gets a little twitchy whenever there’s a good fight going on without it. I figured you ran into some trouble, so I came looking.”

“Well you’ll have to thank your punching hoof for me,” Caballus laughed. And with that, the two charged back into the fray.

On the far side of the brawl, Mystic had been separated and cornered. Recognizing the threat she posed, more and more of the gangers had turned their attention to her. In an effort to blitz the unicorn before she could use any more magic, one bandit came at her in a screaming lunge. She closed her eyes to concentrate, and her horn flashed with a teleportation spell. But it was neither her, nor her attacker that she transported. It was the dirt in between them, and it reappeared several feet straight up. The bandit clumsily tumbled into the brand new hole, and was instantly buried by the earth that had just occupied it.

Still, the desperadoes closed in from all sides. If they couldn’t rush her, they would surround her, wait for an opening and maybe bring her down through attrition. Mystic recognized this too, and started to backpedal, searching for a weak point in the tightening noose. Instead, she backed too far, right into an enemy. The burly bandit wrapped her in a less-than-friendly bear hug, and seeing their chance, the rest mobbed her.

“No, no, no, no,” Mystic squealed as she thrashed. The pony struggling with her suddenly burst into green flames, letting go of her and screaming just as the rest of the gangers dog-piled her. It was a desperate

tactic, but it seemed to be working. Under all the weight, Mystic could barely breathe, let alone focus on a spell. It forcefully reminded her of Roughshod's similar experience in Tier's warehouse. And how she saved him.

"NO!"

A blinding green light presaged the explosion that sent all the bandits flying. The gang's leader gave an irritated look as he witnessed his cronies flung like twigs in a hurricane. "This ornery little varmint ain't worth the trouble of takin' her alive," he muttered, removing his pie from its holster. "Reckon I have to take care of her myself."

He took a few steps toward the cloud of dust left by Mystic's last spell. In the gloomy haze, he made out a tell-tale glow, and readied himself to throw.

Suddenly, the shine intensified tenfold, and the dust was cleared by a furious cyclone. In its center, stood Mystic, eyes closed and breathing deeply. The lead bandit hurled his dessert at her with all his strength.

Mystic faced him and opened her eyes, revealing two radiant beacons of green. The pie halted in midair, and with the slightest glance, Mystic reduced it to ash.

Eyes and mouth wide, the gang leader finally appreciated his peril. "No! Leave me alone, ya horned freak!" he yelled, stumbling over himself trying to put any distance between him and the enraged unicorn, now entirely suffused with an ethereal light and slowly floating toward him.

Before the bandit could scramble very far, he started to feel strange. He looked down and found himself glowing, levitating up into the air as well. Arms and legs flailed wildly, searching for something solid to grab, but came up empty.

Mystic sneered maliciously, and her horn brightened. The helpless stallion noticed a new sensation; his clothes felt tighter. A look down confirmed it; his leather vest and bandanna were magically shrinking. In seconds, the pressure on his chest was excruciating. He couldn't breathe.

Caballus, Roughshod, and nearly everypony else in the fight had all stopped to gape at the sight unfolding. Most of the henchponies broke into a run, while others cowered in abject terror.

Caballus paled, realizing exactly what he was witnessing. "Oh no."

The Inquisipony sprinted toward her, desperate to get her attention. "Mystic, stop! You've got to get a hold of yourself!" he shouted. If she heard his pleas over the high winds and pitiful screams of the constricted bandit, she ignored them.

Caballus came a few steps closer. It was now hard to stay steady, as the supernatural tornado surrounding Mystic threatened to carry him away. He saw the choking criminal gasp and claw at the bandanna strangling him, his face turning blue. "This isn't who you are! For Princess's sake, you're better than this! Listen to me, dammit! STOP!"

The lead gangster finally drooped lifeless in the air. Seeing his struggles cease, Mystic's expression suddenly lost its cruel edge and she blinked a few times. She drifted back to the ground, her incandescent aura dimming and her eyes returning to normal, and she collapsed. Once again, all was quiet and all was dark.

Caballus knelt down to his friend. "Mystic? Are you... alright?"

The unicorn lifted her head, looking around. "I... think so..." She didn't sound very confident in her response. "What... what did I do?" she asked hesitantly, but found her answer in the gang leader's form lying motionless in the dirt.

Tilting his head, Caballus put his ear to the bandit's chest. "He's alive. Barely. Another few seconds, and he might not have been so lucky."

Unable to bear looking at either her friend or victim any longer, Mystic turned away, quivering. "I... I'm sorry," was all she would say.

"It's alright," he said as supportively as he could. The whole display had left him a lump of concern and unease in his stomach that refused to settle. "We can talk about it later. Right now, we have a more pressing concern to deal with," said the Inquisipony, glancing back over his

shoulder. There stood the stranger, surrounded by a score of unconscious bandits.

“It seems we haven’t been properly introduced,” said Caballus walking up to him. There was no cordiality in the statement, but neither was there hostility. Roughshod fell in behind him to add his intimidating presence, though there had been little evidence all night that anything was capable of intimidating this pony in the slightest.

“And I reckon it’ll stay that way, s’long as I take exception to your own anonymous manner.” The stranger’s reply was equally neutral and matter-of-fact. His stance was almost nonchalant, but poised for action at the drop of a hat.

“Usually when I ask a second time,” Caballus growled, “it’s with an excruciator. So here’s your chance to answer correctly the first time: who are you?”

The stranger tensed, eye narrowing. In the blink of an eye, he flung the poncho off his back, right into Caballus’s face. The Inquisipony quickly swiped the garment away, drawing a pie and training it directly to the spot where the stranger stood. Only he wasn’t standing there anymore.

Caballus looked left and right, but the orange pony was gone. He turned to Roughshod, and found his right-hoof stallion looking up. Following the gaze upward, Caballus finally found his target, hovering in the air above him. The lumps under the poncho had not been saddlebags; they had been wings. The wings of a pegasus aiming a loaded slingshot right at Caballus’s head.

The Inquisipony glowered. I can’t believe I fell for that, he scolded himself. A single wrong move and he would have a face full of cupcake before he could even adjust his aim.

“Say,” said Roughshod curiously, “is that a Truesling Peacekeeper 580?”

The orange pegasus cocked an eyebrow. “Uh... well, it’s actually the 560 model. It’s just got the look of an 80 on account of the extra hickory-carbide reinforcements.

Caballus shot Roughshod a quizzical look, as if to ask just what he thought he was doing. The brown pony just shrugged. "What? They're easy to mix-up. Especially since he replaced the targeting array with that elastic autoloader."

"Didn't need it anymore," the stranger replied, still holding the weapon taut. "Had the optics fully integrated into the ole peeper here. Multi-spectral scope, automatic rangefinding and reticle compensation. Took 'till the cows came home to calibrate, but now I can cake a hummingbird at 50 yards."

Roughshod whistled his amazement. "And the ammo?" he asked with genuine interest.

"Double chocolate, with a caramel swirl--"

"And fragmentary nut-clusters!" the two said in unison. Both burst out laughing.

Caballus looked back and forth at the pair, dumbfounded. Was Roughshod making friends with the pegasus holding them both at slingpoint?

"Come on Cab," Roughshod grinned, slapping him on the back, "this guy's got great taste in weapons. How bad could he be?"

"Can't be too bad, I reckon," said the stranger, holstering his slingshot, and swooping down, "seein' as how I'm the ranking officer of the Adequus Arboates in these parts."

"You? An Arbitrotter?" It finally made sense to Caballus. The disguise, the questions, the getaway; he was working undercover. Indeed, with the poncho gone, Caballus could see his cutie mark: the Scales of the Arboates, overlaid by cross-hairs.

"Name's Hairtrigger," he said, shaking both of their hooves firmly, "and I'm Marshall of this here sub-sector."

"Caballus," the Inquisipony said, flashing his rosette, "of the Ordo Hereticolt. And these are my companions, Roughshod and Mystic."

“So you’re the Inquisipony they were after, huh? Been wondering when one of you might show up.”

Caballus frowned. “And why is that?”

The Arbitrotter’s own face turned grim. “On account of our mighty powerful need for one around here, that’s why.”

Chapter 7

Maintaining anonymity is paramount to anyone working undercover, no matter whom it is they are working for. That's why, like Caballus, Hairtrigger had kept his transportation far from prying eyes. Having left the scene of the fight before the potentially angry mob inside could investigate, the pegasus led them to where he had stashed his air-wagon in a ditch south of town. It was a lightweight cedar model, designed to be pulled by a single pegasus travelling with only the barest necessities, and had been camouflaged beneath a pile of tumbleweed and prickly pears.

"I'm afraid I don't have much for y'all in the way of accommodations," Hairtrigger said as he struck his survival flint against a rock, trying to light a fire, "but if you want to stay here tonight while the ruckus in town dies down, the lady is welcome to use my bedroll if she likes." He kicked a few more ineffectual sparks into the waiting bundle of tumbleweed.

"Here," said Mystic helpfully, "let me try."

Caballus and Roughshod both warily took a step back, prompting a mildly confused look from Hairtrigger. With a tilt of her head, a fireball erupted from Mystic's horn. It impacted the tinder violently, throwing flaming twigs into the air and producing a puff of black smoke that rose lazily into the night sky.

The soot-blackened Hairtrigger blinked in surprise, Roughshod and Caballus sharing a quick chuckle at his expense.

"Oops," Mystic said sheepishly, "I meant for it to be... more manageable."

The Arbitrotter blinked again, but merely shrugged. "It... got the fire going, I guess." He put a few more pieces of dried wood on the fire, and soon its flickering light was dancing across their faces.

“So,” Caballus said, sitting down at the fire across from Hairtrigger, “in town you said that an Inquisipony was needed around here. What did you mean by that?”

The pegasus sighed. He stared at the flames, thinking about how best to explain it, before again looking Caballus in the eye. “I joined the Arboates just shy of ten years ago, not much more than a bright-eyed, fire-bellied little colt. I’ve roamed the sub-sector up and down, ‘laying down the Lex,’ as we say out here, and I reckon I’ve seen it all: Rustlers, bank robbers, train highjackers, wagon-choppers. You name it, and I’ve been its judge, jury and executioner.”

He paused, staring into the campfire for a moment. “But lately, something... else, something different has been going on. Ponies have been disappearing.”

Caballus raised an eyebrow. “Disappearing?”

“Yup,” Hairtrigger said simply, “gone. Poof. Like they weren’t never there. Some towns, folks’ll wake up in the morning and their neighbors next door have all up and gone overnight. I’ve stopped at small outposts one week and found them completely empty the next, not a pony in sight. Food still on the table, clothes still on the line. Like they just... vanished.” He shuddered.

“No ransom notes?” Roughshod queried. “No calling cards? Not even any tracks?”

Hairtrigger shook his head. “I know crime around these parts. Heck, I grew up with it. But this ain’t normal kidnappers or gangers clearing folks out in a turf war. These settlers didn’t have much worth stealing and couldn’t afford any ransom. Nothing was taken from the crime scenes anyway. Only thing besides vanishing that they have in common is sometimes I’ll find a strange pile of dirt or two, but you can imagine that doesn’t turn up much in the Precinct records.”

“Do you know of anypony who would do something like that?” Mystic asked Caballus.

The Inquisipony sat in thought for a moment. "No," he finally said, "but it doesn't sound like heretical activity, though. Cult-related kidnappings tend to be ritualized; they leave behind lots of clues, sometimes intentionally... and often a mess, too. But Friendquisitional records might be more complete, or at least less... censored, than those of a subsector courthouse. I'll have Fyzzix do some searching when we rendezvous with him." Caballus returned his attention to Hairtrigger. "What I'd really like to know, is what does Tier Ver Kaufer have to do with this? Why are you interested in him?"

"His name came up in a smuggling investigation," Hairtrigger explained. "Didn't mean much to me at first, just some two-bit poacher that comes by to trap Jackalope when they migrate through here. Illegal, sure, but not that high a priority for me. But that was before I compared the smuggler's trail with the disappearances. It seemed like wherever this here Rogue Trader went, vanishing ponies were none too far behind."

"All the more reason to find him then," Roughshod said, to everypony's agreement.

For a while, nopony said a word. The only noises were the crackling of the campfire and the chirping of insects. Somewhere in the distance, a coyote howled.

"We'd better hit the hay," Hairtrigger finally said, "if we're going back into town tomorrow. Like I said, I ain't got much for you. I usually just sleep on the ground." He wandered around to back of his air-wagon to search for his bedroll.

"So," Caballus whispered, once the Arbitrotter was rifling through his belongings out of earshot, "what do you think of him?"

"I guess I like him well enough," Roughshod replied casually.

"Okay, but do you trust him?"

"I don't trust anypony but you, Sweet Pea here, and the Princess herself," Roughshod chuckled. "But I suppose I'd trust him a little if I had to, which is more than most."

“What about you, Mystic?”

The unicorn looked up from the fire as if roused from a deep thought. “Oh, Hairtrigger? I... um... he’s... nice, I guess?” It was impossible to tell in the dim firelight, but she almost looked like her face had reddened, ever so slightly.

But then the pegasus in question returned with his bedroll, and he laid it out for Mystic. “Ma’am,” he said politely, offering her the only opportunity to avoid sleeping on the hard ground. It wasn’t much better, but it was something, and Mystic just as politely accepted.

The other three made themselves as comfortable as possible on the rocky soil, using their coats as blankets, and went to sleep.

Mystic walked down the deserted main street of Applemattox alone. Where had everypony gone, she wondered. For that matter, there was no sign of Roughshod, Caballus or even Hairtrigger either. They had been right behind her, hadn’t they? But now they were gone, just like they had... vanished.

The plan was to go into town to search for clues together. It simply wasn’t like Caballus to split up without telling her. Something must have happened. Something went wrong. That was the only explanation.

The sun was too bright, its oppressive heat beating down on her and making her squint. The dry, dusty air parched Mystic’s throat and irritated her eyes further. She rubbed them.

When she opened them again, she saw a dark figure, like a fleeting shadow, on the edge of her vision. She spun around, but found nothing. Only more empty street.

The unicorn took a wary step backward. Sweat beaded on her forehead that had nothing to do with the hot sun. Somewhere beside her, a loud creaking noise nearly made her jump out of her skin. She jerked her head in the direction of the sound, eyes landing on a simple wooden door. The front door to a structure that looked like it could have been the

Applemattox town hall. It was slightly ajar, creaking irritably as the wind moved it back and forth.

Against all rational caution, and against every instinct that said she shouldn't, Mystic approached the door. Try as she might, she simply couldn't resist whatever force directed her leaden legs to gently step over the threshold. The structure's main hall was dark but for slivers of light that came in through gaps in the shuttered windows. All that was in the room was a desk, some upturned tables, and a slightly elevated podium on the far end. Some cabinets had been left where they'd tipped over a long time ago, their contents strewn and shredded all across the floor. The air smelled musty and stale, and everything appeared to be covered in a layer of dust and grime thick enough to suggest it had gone unused and unoccupied for quite some time.

The hairs on Mystic's neck stood on end. The room was unoccupied no longer. The shadow had returned, and faster than she could follow, it flitted across the empty space. Something was stalking her, and it wasn't a pony; no pony could move like that.

The door behind her slammed shut. Immediately she pulled the knob, kicked at the wood, but it wouldn't open. There was no escape now. Mystic tried to scream, wanted so desperately to make any noise at all, but her voice wouldn't allow it. All that came out was a strangled peep.

She took off galloping. There was another door across the room, and she willed her stubborn, terror-frozen muscles to carry her toward it. The shadow-beast was right behind her. She could hear its eager panting; feel the hot breath on her neck, though she dared not look back. *I'm not going to make it*, was all she could think.

But she did. She bolted through the lightless opening and threw the door closed behind her, bracing it with all of her strength. The door rattled and shook, the sound of scratching claws on wood drowning out Mystic's whimpers, sobs and half-uttered pleas for help.

It took the unicorn a moment to realize that, in the next moment, the only sounds she could hear were her own thundering heartbeat and ragged breathing. Whatever was outside was gone. For now. Her legs were weak, trembling from fear and adrenaline, refusing to pick her up. Propping

herself with her back against the door, she lit her horn. It cast a faint green light across her tiny refuge, and she had to hold back a gasp at what it revealed.

The walls of the small room, devoid of shelves or windows, were covered in writing. Mystic recognized some as heretical icons from the books Caballus let her read. Some were blasphemous verses scrawled in High Equestrian that made her sick to her stomach trying to translate. There was script in some other, alien tongue that seemed to shift and writhe across the wall's surface, defying her attempts to make sense of them. There were runes so unholy that they burned her eyes at the merest glance. And then she saw the images, depictions of things pony eyes were not meant to see, and pony minds were not meant to comprehend. Though crudely drawn, they were no less nightmarish for it, and Mystic clenched her eyes shut to avoid looking at them any longer.

The stillness didn't last as long as Mystic had hoped. While she tried to get a hold of herself, and figure out what to do next, she heard muffled whispers. At first they were quiet, a hum that floated in and out of her consciousness. When she finally noticed them, she wasn't convinced that they weren't her imagination playing tricks on her. But the voices got louder, clearer, and unnervingly familiar. They said things, things that didn't make sense, things she couldn't understand, and things she wished she couldn't.

Thump!

Mystic's eyes shot open. Before her, in the middle of the floor, lay a wooden hatch. Had it been there a moment ago? She didn't notice it when she came in, though she had been a little busy. It was the only other feature in the room, besides the symbols on the walls, so how could she have missed it? But there it was, and something was trying to open it from below.

Thump!

The impact set her body trembling even harder than before. The whispers also increased in volume and their tone became threatening. She was sure they were coming from below as well. Before long, they were

shouting, taunting and jeering at her with their ceaseless, profane chatter. It was too much.

In a blind panic, Mystic scraped at the exit she had previously held shut with her hooves, trying to get back out. Whatever was under that hatch, she would rather face the shadow-thing outside. As if in answer, the door was flung open with tremendous force, hurling the hapless unicorn right into the middle of the room. She landed at the hatch's edge, and before she even had time to crawl away, it too opened wide.

Underneath, there was darkness. Darkness and claws.

Dozens of shadowy arms reached out, grabbing her, clutching her cloak, her mane, her tail. They dragged her down, the dim light of the hatch's opening fading completely, until all she knew was oblivion and a chorus of blood-curdling laughter.

Mystic returned to the waking world the same way she had left her dreaming one: screaming bloody murder.

It took Caballus, Roughshod and Hairtrigger a moment to determine that the commotion wasn't from an enemy ambush, and another to restrain Mystic, who was still thrashing in the throes of her half-waking nightmare.

"She's a wily one, ain't she," Hairtrigger grunted while holding down her legs.

"Only when she has bad dreams," Roughshod replied through gritted teeth. They had her pinned, but her magic was wildly pulling at them, still struggling to get free. Fortunately, she wasn't focusing enough to cast any real spells, or the team might have been hard pressed to keep her down without actually hurting her.

"Mystic!" Caballus shouted at the stricken unicorn, "It's just a nightmare. You're safe."

Immediately her shrieks died down to a frightened panting, and a spark of recognition returned to her eyes. Once Mystic stopped struggling against them, the three released her.

“Alright,” panted Caballus. “I thought we had put this behind us, that you weren’t having that dream anymore.”

“N-no,” Mystic said, still shaking a little, “n-not *that* dream.” She tried to look Caballus in the eye, but couldn’t bring herself to do it. Instead, she curled up in her borrowed bedroll and did her best to go back to sleep.

Having nothing left to say, Caballus returned to his patch of dirt, with Roughshod and Hairtrigger reluctantly following him. Once the three stallions had bedded down again, Hairtrigger whispered to the Inquisipony. “Y’all care to explain to me what that was all about?”

“I wish I could,” he replied curtly, “but I really don’t know the slightest thing about it.”

Roughshod saw that the pegasus wasn’t satisfied with that answer, so he piped in to elaborate. “There are two things that we’ve never gotten Mystic to talk about: her past, and her dreams.”

“When you work with somepony long enough,” he continued, “you get a feel for ‘em, you know? Like in the Guard: you get to know the guy you’re sharing a foxhole with inside and out, and they know you. Same with us. Little Sweet Pea over there has spent almost every day with us since we met her, so she’s an open book as far as we’re concerned. But when we ask about what happened to her before then, well...” He trailed off.

“Not a word, I take it,” Hairtrigger said.

Roughshod nodded. “Same with her dreams. When we first took her in, she’d have these horrible night-terrors. Screaming, thrashing, flinging the furniture around with her magic. But when we woke her up, she’d never tell us what she dreamt about. Only that it was the same nightmare each time.”

“I hear a unicorn’s magic sometimes lets them see visions of the future,” said the Arbitrotter. “Y’all think it could be that?”

“Maybe...” Roughshod conceded. He’d heard of that too, but he’d always thought of it as a superstitious rumor. “But the way she’s so tight-

lipped about it, I'm guessing it's something from way back that's haunting her. Something bad, too. Anyway, over time, it seemed to get better. She didn't have it as often, or as badly, and it's been quite a while since the last time. I almost thought she was over it until just-"

"Except," Caballus said, cutting him off, "she said that this wasn't *that* dream. This one is new. Given her reaction, though, it must be just as bad."

His tone was grave, and his expression stern. "And if it is, I just pray to the Princess she really can't see into our future."

Huddling away from the others, pretending to have fallen back asleep, Mystic shuddered. *Me too.*

Chapter 8

The four entered the town mid-morning, striding resolutely down the main street of Applemattox. This time, they didn't even bother with disguising who they were, or what they were doing.

"It's obvious that Tier allied himself with the gangs long before we arrived here," Caballus had reasoned before they had set out, "and he was expecting us. So if we can't use the element of surprise, we might as well try using intimidation."

With that strategy in mind, Caballus led their formation wearing his rosette on the lapel of his greatcoat for all to see. Atop his head sat his favored capotain, stylized with the skull motif that the citizenry usually associated with the Friendquisition. Roughshod followed close behind him, the large stallion dressed in his full combat fatigues and flak armor, and making no effort to hide the arsenal of pastries on his person. On the Inquisipony's other flank, Hairtrigger had his worn black, Arboates-issue carapace armor, but had also elected to wear a worn, leather duster over it. A bandolier of cupcakes and muffins was draped around him, and fastened to it was the golden badge of his station: the Marshall Star. However, despite this show of force and authority, the pony who seemed to be commanding the most fear from the townsfolk was Mystic. She had worn only her cloak, but with the hood down, leaving her horn on full display.

Most of the settler ponies gave the team a wide berth as they walked down the street. Those that stopped to stare were encouraged to move on by a stern glance from the Inquisipony or by Hairtrigger brandishing one of his slingshots. When those proved insufficient, as in the case of a small posse of thug-types they passed, some sparkles from Mystic's horn were enough to convince them to stay out of the way. The horror stories told to them by their bandit friends the night before probably helped.

"Our first stop will be the town hall," Caballus told the others, "to see what sort of records we can find of Tier's activities. Even if his business was off the books, his visits won't be. Then we'll go to the Sherriff's office and gather any intel on the bandits that attacked us."

Mentioning the town hall brought all-too-fresh memories of her dream from the night before to Mystic's mind. "So, uh, Hairtrigger, do you know the Sherriff here?" she asked, to take her mind off them. "I mean, have you ever worked together at all?"

"Nope," the pegasus shook his head. "Though if I happen to make his acquaintance, I might have to haul him off for incompetence, the way he's letting the gangers have their run of the place around here. For all we know, he could be on the take."

"Well, please be sure to do so only after we get a good picture of what we're up against." Caballus said.

"A'course," Hairtrigger agreed. "Still, it just steams my saddle to think of those bandits that tangled with us last night. It's like they think they're beyond justice, just because they're way out here in the sticks. Well, I tell you what: nopony's above the law."

"Actually," Caballus said, "the *Lex Equestrialis* doesn't apply to Inquisiponies and those acting on their behalf. So *I* am above the law."

"Fine, but nopony else--"

"And technically," Roughshod interrupted, "the Equestrian Guard fall under the jurisdiction of the Ponissariat."

Hairtrigger rolled his eyes with a sigh, and looked back at Mystic, waiting for her to chime in.

She just shrugged, and the four of them continued down the street. It was only a few minutes later that they arrived, and Caballus led the way into the town hall. Hairtrigger went in after him, and Roughshod was about to follow, but he paused. Looking back, he found Mystic standing stock still, staring at the door.

"Something wrong, Sweet Pea?" he asked.

"It's... it's not squeaky..." she said.

Roughshod cocked his eyebrow, and gave the simple swinging door an experimental push. It silently swung open and closed, obviously well oiled. "You feeling alright?" he asked, concern creeping into his voice.

"I... uh..." She shook her head. "Yeah, I'm fine," she said, and pushed past the stallion through the door.

Inside, Caballus was staring down the clerk behind the desk. Before he had even said a word, the Admanestratum flunky was already shrinking away in fear.

"By the authority of the Goddess-Empress of Ponykind," he declared loudly, slamming his rosette on the desk, "I hereby invoke the Friendquisitional Remit. As a loyal citizen of Equestria, you are compelled to my service, until such a time as it is no longer required. Should you be found wanting in your new duties, I will not hesitate to dispense the harshest punishments available."

The clerk's jaw dropped, and his eyes went wide. He hadn't even had a chance to stammer incoherently before Caballus also dropped a notepad down in front of him.

"This is the information I need. Bring me any and all records with these criteria *immediately*, and you may return to your duties unhindered. If I suspect any records to be missing, omitted, incomplete or tampered with, your innocence or guilt in the matter will be determined by a full data-audit. *Posthumously.*"

By then, the clerk had turned almost completely pale and was cowering beneath the verbal assault. As soon as Caballus was done, the hapless file-jockey scampered off to the file room to fulfill his request.

Once he was gone, Roughshod burst out laughing. "That's my favorite part of the job, right there. Poor sap nearly pissed himself!"

Caballus couldn't help but giggle a little himself. "It does cut through the red tape, doesn't it?"

"I'll say," added Hairtrigger with an impressed smile. "Even with the proper warrants, it woulda taken me hours to get them authenticated, and

maybe days to search the archives myself, even in this little backwater. Boy howdy, I got into the wrong business.”

As they laughed together, Caballus noticed that somepony hadn’t joined in.

“Mystic?” he asked, watching her look around with a perplexed look on her face. “Everything alright?”

“Oh... yeah,” she replied absentmindedly. “Say, does this place look... cleaner than you would have expected?”

Caballus surveyed the main hall, noting the carefully organized front desk, the uniform stacks of filing cabinets along the walls, and the podium at the far end for giving the occasional speech to the townsfolk. “About as clean as most Admanestratum offices, I suppose. That clerk did seem like he might have been the fussy type.”

“Downright persnickety, if you ask me,” Hairtrigger added, walking around the desk and flicking the writing quill off of it, just because. “All them bean-countin’ scribes are like that, no matter where you roam. Everything’s gotta be just so for them.”

Mystic couldn’t argue that the interior, despite the dusty climate and general shortage of modern amenities, was in near-pristine order. Perhaps she was worrying about nothing. Maybe it *was* just a silly dream. Sure, the room was *like* what she had seen last night, but it wasn’t the dark, dirty death-trap from her nightmare.

“Say, Sweet Pea,” Roughshod said, bringing her out of her thoughts, “what are you casting?”

“Huh?”

“Your horn. It’s glowing. Are you casting a spell?”

She looked up, and saw that the protrusion on her head was, in fact, giving off its tell-tale light. “I... Uh... I’m not... I mean, I didn’t think I was... W-woah!” Mystic dug her hooves in and braced herself as the invisible force of magic pulled at her horn.

The appendage lurched violently around the room, back and forth, dragging the hapless unicorn attached to it along for the ride. She zigzagged around the main hall, plowing through the tables and sending them tumbling. At her horn's whim, Mystic was swung wide around into the filing cabinets. She tried to grab one after another as an anchor, but succeeded only in capsizing each one she passed. All the others could do was stand back and let it, not willing to risk injuring Mystic by trying to get her under control.

With one final zip across the room, a baffled Mystic finally came to a halt. The unicorn looked behind her, seeing the mess her unexpected spin around the room had made. *Now* the place looked like it had in her dream, missing only the dust. This, however, was a less disturbing revelation than what she realized she was standing in front of.

It was the door. The one she'd taken refuge behind when she was attacked in her nightmare. The one that led to the walls covered in writing. And the darkness.

The three stallions rushed over to her. All at once, they assailed her with questions about her well-being and what she had done.

"I'm fine everypony," she reassured them, cautiously trying to edge away from the door. "My horn just... went off for some reason, but it stopped now. I think it's over."

"But why did it do that in the first place?" Roughshod wondered.

She glanced nervously at the door again. "I don't know. I guess sometimes magic can be just... well... chaotic."

Hairtrigger seemed skeptical. "I don't know, little missy. It almost looked like that horn'a yours was... searching for something."

"Or leading us somewhere," Roughshod added.

The green pony didn't even want to think about what might happen if they were right. "What? No. That's not it. My magic just got out of control and took me on a joy ride. There wasn't any rhyme or reason to it at all."

“Unicorn magic doesn’t happen without a reason, Mystic,” Caballus said. “Not like that. I think it was leading us to this door.”

Mystic’s blood chilled. “Th-this door? No, no I don’t think so. There’s nothing special about it.”

“Well there’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?” Caballus said, putting his hoof on the knob. Mystic cringed and looked away as he turned it, unwilling to look inside.

“Huh,” she head Roughshod say after a moment, “I guess you were right Sweet Pea. Just a janitor’s closet.”

Mystic peeked with one eye, and saw that he was right. It was just an ordinary janitor’s closet. There were shelves full of cleaning supplies, brooms and mops along the walls and other tools and equipment needed for the building’s upkeep. She finally let out the breath that she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Yeah,” the unicorn laughed with relief, “See, I told you it was-”

“Wait a second,” Caballus interrupted. If her blood had been chilled before, the way he had said that made it freeze in Mystic’s veins. “There’s something else here.”

All eyes were on him a he kicked aside a pile of rolled up carpets in the middle of the floor. “It looks like some sort of... trap door. Hmmm, not original,” he said as he examined it, “it was installed sometime after the structure was built.”

“Looks an awful lot like somepony’s trying to hide something in here,” said Hairtrigger, putting his hoof on the latch. “I say we take a look-”

“WAIT!”

Everypony looked at Mystic. She hadn’t meant to say anything, but it had just burst out. “I mean... it’s just that...” she stammered, struggling to come up with a reason for them not to open it. “What if there’s something dangerous down there?”

The three seemed unimpressed, and unsympathetic. “That’s our job, Sweet Pea,” Roughshod said plainly. “We can handle it.”

Mystic gulped down as much of her terror as she could, hoping he was right. It was quickly becoming clear to her that there was no way she could avoid it. All she could do now was try to muster up enough courage to go through with it.

“Here, I’ll do it,” Roughshod said. Hairtrigger and Caballus stepped back, one aiming a slingshot, and the other a pie. Mystic tilted her head and readied a spell.

With a nod from the Inquisipony, Roughshod flung open the hatch. Beneath, there was a long, dark staircase leading deep underground. Even without knowing what to expect, that wasn’t *entirely* unexpected. Caballus slowly, cautiously started down the stairs. “Mystic. Behind me. I’ll need the light.”

The unicorn hurriedly caught up to Caballus, holding onto her spell, keeping it primed and ready in case of an ambush. It also doubled as the only illumination in the stairway, pushing the gloom back with each step. After a minute or so, the wooden planks lining the walls gave way to solid rock. Every sound was lent an echo by stone: the soft clops of their hooves, the hum of Mystic’s magic and the laborious whirring of Hairtrigger’s eye.

“I’ve got nothing showing up on the ole peeper yet,” he said. “Having a helluva time with some sort of... interference, though. Gonna give me a headache somethin’ fierce if I can’t get it to focus soon.”

Caballus glanced back over his shoulder and shrugged. “Could be any number of underground phenomena. I can have Fyzzix take a look at it for you when we see him.”

“That’d be awful kind of—hey! What was that?” the Arbitrotter exclaimed. Everypony’s attention snapped forward again, down the dark incline.

“What? What did you see?” whispered Mystic nervously.

“Not sure... mighta just been the interference. Infrared picked up a big, fuzzy... shadow, I guess. Probably nothing.”

“Let’s keep moving,” said Caballus. “If there is something, I’d rather go find it than let it find us.” He paused a moment, peering forward. “I think I see a light down there at the bottom.”

Sure enough, after another minute’s slow descent, they reached the bottom of the stairs. It widened into a large rectangular room, carved from the very bedrock. Even though it was empty, there were several torches lighting the room. All along the walls, there were other entrances, each leading to a stairway just like the one they had come down.

“What do you reckon this place is?” Hairtrigger asked.

Caballus frowned. “I don’t know, but it looks like there are tunnels leading to places all over Applemattox.” He trotted over to the one stretch of wall in the room that lacked a doorway. “Here. There’s something written here.”

The others sidled up to him. Roughshod brought over a torch in his teeth. When the flickering light brought the carvings into clarity, everypony but Caballus immediately recoiled.

“I was afraid of this,” he mumbled.

Mystic knew the symbols. She had seen them on a different wall. Apparently, Hairtrigger and Roughshod were having a reaction similar to hers when she first saw them.

“Jeez, Cab. I’ll never understand how you can just look at it like that,” Roughshod said, averting his own eyes.

“Years of practice, my friend. Inquisiponies-in-training are required to study the Malign Text so that we can ignore the... ‘side effects’ when we see it in the field.”

“What... what does it say?” Mystic asked, not sure if she really wanted to know.

Caballus scrutinized the symbols. He read them slowly. “Here shall the Children find refuge...”

“And all others shall find only death,” a voice behind them finished.

Chapter 9

“You should not have come here, Inquisipony,” Sniffles said with smile. “This is a sacred, *secret* meeting place, and I’m afraid you aren’t allowed.”

The vile pony was taller than the last time Caballus saw him, a full head taller than Roughshod in fact, by virtue of his outfit. Except for his head, Sniffles was encased in bulky, olive green power armor. Hissing slime oozed from every joint, corroding metal that was forged to resist the weathering of millennia. Tubes running from the backpack gently pulsed as they pumped something best left unknown between its plates. Even if it hadn’t been decorated with the putrid iconography of the damned, especially the tissue box cutie mark painted on the flank, it was unmistakably the ancient, pockmarked suit of a Traitor Marine.

The others staggered backward. Caballus alone managed to hide his shock, but made no such effort to hide his disgust. “This is the sovereign soil of Equestria, heretic. *You’re* the one who’s not welcome.”

Sniffles’ roaring laughter echoed in the chamber, raspy and hoarse. Eventually it ended in a coughing fit that was somehow no less jovial. “My little Inquisipony, I never said you weren’t welcome!” He paused to reign in his dripping nose with a wet snort. “I only ask that you resign your offensive occupation and renounce your False Princess before you try to join our humble ranks. Our recruitment policy is quite clear about that.”

“Join you? I’ve heard enough.” Caballus drew a pie. It was dense, baked with fresh pumpkin. He would need the extra stopping power.

“Boss,” Roughshod whispered nervously, “You sure we can take him? I mean, he may be ugly heretic scum, but... but for Celestia’s sake! He’s a Goddess-damned Pony Marine!”

“We outnumber him,” Caballus replied, “and he’s not even armed. Just stay sharp and we’ll be fine.”

“Outnumbered?” The Marine laughed again. “Oh dear, what a notion. Since you’ve stumbled upon our church, perhaps it’s time to meet the congregation.” He stamped his hind leg once on the stone floor, causing a loud metallic clang to reverberate throughout the stone chamber.

The tone faded, and was answered by a new sound. The sound of shuffling hoofsteps. A diminutive, robed figure appeared from the entrance directly behind Sniffles, descending the staircase that led up to somewhere else in town. It cowered behind the armored giant, until the Marine bowed his ear down to it.

“I’ve gathered them, lord, just as you asked,” whispered the Admanestratum clerk from before. He glanced over, and at the sight of Caballus, he gave a frightened peep and scurried back behind Sniffles.

“Come then, my children,” Sniffles called out in a jolly, nasal bellow that boomed in the stone hollow. “Come meet our new friends!”

The sound of shuffling returned, but much louder this time. First one set of hooves, then another, and another. In moments, dozens of ponies began filing out of each of the entrances. Except for the space given to the Inquisipony’s team, the whole room was soon packed with ponies standing shoulder to shoulder. Caballus recognized faces in the growing crowd: the old bartender, bandits from the gang fight, a respectable-looking couple he had seen on the street, and many others; ponies from all walks of life. It looked like the whole town had answered Sniffles’ summons, and they were all staring accusingly at the four of them.

“Hairtrigger?” Caballus calmly inquired, “I’m not familiar with how things are typically done out here at sector’s edge, but is it normal for the entire population of a settlement like Applemattox to be at the beck and call of a renegade Marine?”

“Er... Not typically, no,” the Arbitrotter said. “I reckon this one slipped through the cracks.”

“Ya think?” scoffed Roughshod.

Sniffles smirked at the Inquisipony. “The haughty powers of ‘mighty’ Equestria don’t reach here, friend. They won’t. They can’t.” He nudged the

clerk forward again, stroking the unfortunate pony affectionately. "These ponies were loyal Equestrians once. They prayed to a False Princess that never answered, and tithed to a bureaucracy too bloated and corrupt to protect them from the horrors that lurked beyond the edges of the known world. They cried out for help, and in our infinite beneficence, we answered."

Even though he was beginning to pale and tremble from his proximity to Sniffles' gut-wrenching stench, the clerk smiled contentedly at the attention he was receiving, like an adoring puppy. At least until his eyes rolled into his head, he vomited, and collapsed in a convulsing heap.

Sniffles grinned. "See how grateful they are? Without our help, they would be helpless, easy prey to the monsters that steal ponies in the night. But now they live free of fear and oppression. All they had to do was see Equestria for the lie that it is, embrace the truth, and be liberated."

"Liberation!" the gathered crowd cheered in unison.

Caballus sneered at them. "I'd wager my rosette that this abomination and his ilk are the very ones responsible for those disappearances," he announced. All he got in return were their blank stares.

"No it weren't! It were the Diggers!" came a decidedly uneducated-sounding voice from somewhere in the back. There were several murmurs of agreement.

"Yeah, the Diggers were taking ponies, but then the Children came and they stopped!" an old farm-mare yelled. "They've done more for us than Equestria ever did!" Several more cheers supported her.

The Inquisipony raised his eyebrow and glanced back to Hairtrigger. "What are they talking about?"

"Why these ignorant, backward..." the pegasus said with disbelief. "The Diggers are an old legend told by the settlers. They're bogeys, spooks said to live underground out in the Rocklands, lurking and such. But there ain't no such thing," he said aiming his comments at the herd of townsfolk. "It's just a story! Just something you tell your misbehavin' foals; that the

Diggers will snatch them up if they don't listen. No pony in their right minds actually believes it!"

Caballus held up a hoof. "Don't waste your breath on them. Every pony here is clearly too tainted by the traitor's lies to listen to reason. Words won't change any of their minds now. The only way to save them is with purifying flame. A flame I will be pleased to deliver."

"An impressive claim, Inquisipony," Sniffles wheezed. "Only I wonder; how then do you intend to make your daring escape, cut off and surrounded on all sides as you are?"

"Been a mite curious on that score myself," Hairtrigger muttered.

"Don't worry," said Roughshod, "Cab always has a plan to get out of fixes like this." The brown stallion turned to Caballus expectantly. "Right?"

Caballus shrugged. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Ha! This is Equestria's best and brightest, sent to foil our glorious plans?" the Marine mocked. "You four couldn't foil your way out of a hole in the ground. Which is convenient, because that's where we throw the unbelievers around here."

The ponies surrounding the team began to slowly close in, forcing them up against the wall, step by step.

"Can you get us out of here, Mystic?" Caballus asked, trying to keep the concern out of his voice as the space between them and the heretical mob disappeared.

"You mean... as in teleporting?" she said anxiously. "I... I'm not very good at using that spell on ponies. And it gets exponentially more dangerous with each passenger you try to-"

"As long as the odds are better than *certain death*," Roughshod said impatiently, "I'd say it's better than staying here."

"Alright..." Mystic said, closing her eyes. Magical power began to gather around the unicorn. A chill filled the rest of the room as her spell

drew even the heat from the air into itself. Some in the heretical herd hesitated as their breath fogged in the air right in front of their muzzles. *Aim for the surface*, she told herself. *I just have to get us to the surface.*

“Don’t let them escape, my Children!” Sniffles shouted with delight, like a coach chiding a team of foals playing some field game. “We wouldn’t want them to miss all the fun!”

The tainted ponies all roared and charged at once. Caballus dropped one screaming heretic with a pie, and tripped another before the masses were upon him. Hairtrigger brought down three with quick shots from his Peacekeeper, and tried to get clear of the heretics by flying above them, but somepony grabbed a hold of his leg and he was dragged down. Roughshod reared up and slammed the first attacker in reach down into the ground, then kicked a second back into the oncoming tide, bowling many over. But he too was quickly overwhelmed by their sheer numbers.

Finally, the mob reached Mystic, who was still trying to finish their magical escape. One bandit lunged forward and tackled her, slamming her into the wall. Her head collided with the stone and her eyes snapped open. With her concentration broken, Mystic’s teleportation spell began to destabilize. The ball of energy swirled violently around the tip of Mystic’s horn for a moment, before it imploded to a single speck of light.

The unicorn stared at the speck, blinking, oblivious to the violence all around her. A split second later, it burst in a blinding nova.

Mystic awoke with a start. She would have yelped had a hoof not immediately covered her mouth.

“Hush, little lady,” said Hairtrigger’s voice in the pitch darkness, “you’re fine.”

“What happened?” she whispered, cautiously standing up. The floor still felt like stone, but it was uneven, not the smooth floor of the heretical shrine. The air had an iron taste to it. “Where are we? Where are the others?”

“Not sure,” he replied, “but I reckon that little trick of yours worked after all. Seems your aim was a mite off, though. Can’t tell which direction it sent us, but probably no more than a few dozen meters or so, right? Lucky for us, those heathens seem to have dug their little chapel near this here cave. If your spell scooped up the others, I’m sure they’re around here somewhere too.”

Mystic’s head throbbed from the effort, but she lit her horn to look around. The pegasus’s face appeared in the gloom, the soft light reflecting back off his augmetic lens. He was covered in soot, singed black by the spell’s side effects.

“Are you okay?” the unicorn asked.

“Fine, thanks to you,” he said. “Compared to the fix we were in, getting out of this cave should be easy.” Hairtrigger reached into a pocket on his armor and produced a luminator. Reciting a quick prayer to awaken the machine spirits and fireflies within, the Arbitrotter was rewarded with a beam of light revealing the cave tunnel before him. With the luminator affixed to his duster, he led the way forward.

The pair walked the narrow cave tunnel for several minutes in silence, following its twists and turns until it began to widen. Before they even realized it, they had walked right into a much larger cavern, one filled with a forest of stalactites and stalagmites. In every direction, stone spikes jutted from the floor like the trunks of trees, and others hung down from the impenetrable darkness high above. With every loudly echoing hoofstep, it was becoming even more apparent that it was a massive space.

Mystic tried to brighten her horn, to see if there were any clue that might lead to an exit, but it seemed the harder she tried, the harder the darkness fought to keep its secrets. It was as if the light itself was afraid to stray too far, lest it too became lost in the cave forever. “So...” she said, “which way should we go?”

“Beats me,” the Arbitrotter replied with a shrug. “Being trapped underground ain’t nowhere in the Arboates training manual. Wouldn’t suppose there’s some sort of spell you could just whip up to figure it out the right direction, is there?”

“I’m afraid not.” The unicorn thought for a moment, rubbing her chin. “But I think if we keep close to the wall, we’ll either come to another tunnel or at least we’ll know when we’re going around in circles.”

The pegasus mulled the plan over. “That’s actually darn clever,” he said, keeping the cave wall on his left as he set off into the dark. “Let’s go.”

After another couple minutes of walking went by without conversation, Hairtrigger spoke. “Say, you seem like an awful smart little filly. Did you go to some sort of fancy school or something?”

At first, Mystic said nothing, responding only with stony-faced silence. “I read a lot of books,” she finally said.

“Ah... right, sorry. They told me you were all hush-hush about things like that.”

Just then, the pair approached a massive stone column that lay across their path, one that was too long to simply walk around without straying away from the wall. Hairtrigger almost simply flew over it before he remembered that Mystic didn’t share the ability. With a polite gesture, he offered her a lift, which she accepted.

“It’s just that I got to wondering,” he continued as he picked her up in his hooves, “being the sharp, talented thing you are, maybe Caballus plucked you out of some sort of fancy school for pretty, gifted unicorns.” His mouth curled in a debonair grin.

Mystic wasn’t entirely sure what to say to that. She was unaccustomed to being flattered. Thankfully, the dim lighting helped obscure the blush on her face. “Well, I promise you, he didn’t.”

Hairtrigger gently set the unicorn down on the other side of the column, where they resumed their trek. “You just seem kind of young to be doing Friendquisition work, is all.”

“I guess... it’s all I have,” was Mystic’s blunt response. The thought was a somber but familiar one, and she pushed it aside. “Besides,” she said, perking up a little, “I’m not much younger than you are.”

“No ma’am,” Hairtrigger chuckled, “I reckon you’re not. So, it’s books then, huh? Never been much for ‘em myself. Only one I ever really read is the *Lex*, and let me tell you something, little missy; it is *dry*. What sort of books are you keen on?”

“Whatever Caballus has on hand. There’s not much space on the ship for them, but he keeps a rotating library for the both of us while we travel. Mostly grimoires and spell-books for me to study, but others too: books on Equestrian history, sector culture and politics, classical literature. He often reads with me, especially theological texts for our regular devotionals. A couple times Fyzzix has even loaned me one of his sacred Technical Tomes. They’re almost impossible to understand for anypony who’s not a Meq-Priest, but the diagrams are still rather...”

Mystic paused when she noticed that Hairtrigger had fallen behind a few paces. “What is it?”

Hairtrigger had stopped to glare irritably into the darkness. “Daggum interference again. Can’t even see as good as my real eye anymore.” He tapped the side of the metal casing jutting from his eye socket, to no effect.

“What do you think is wrong with it?”

“No way to know,” the pegasus shrugged. “I try to look out into the dark, but I’m still seeing these big, fuzzy... shadows everywhere.”

A knot of unease filled Mystic’s stomach. She wasn’t sure what caused it in that particular moment; maybe the gravity of being lost in the cave had finally caught up with her. Maybe it was her worries about what had happened to Caballus and Roughshod. Hairtrigger talking about all the “shadows” around them certainly wasn’t helping. But whatever reason, Mystic was all of a sudden very anxious about something. She began to trot a little faster. “Could we pick up the pace a little? I’d like to-“

“Get down!” Hairtrigger shouted.

Chapter 10

Before she could even comprehend what had happened, Mystic found herself pinned on her back, the Arbitrotter on top of her. There was a dreadful, screeching whistle, accompanied by a sound like the shattering of glass. Looking past the pegasus above her, Mystic saw the stone pillar she was just standing beside had been riddled with crystal shards. Its whole surface glittered in the dim light with jagged-edged rubies, emeralds and sapphires, each embedded in the rock by a tremendous force. The unicorn could only gape in shock as she realized that, but for Hairtrigger's quick actions, those razor-sharp gems could have just as easily been embedded in her.

"Quit your gawkin' and *run!*" Hairtrigger yelled as he heaved her back onto her hooves. There were large, ragged holes in his duster, but the rest of him was miraculously unscathed.

Mystic didn't need to be told twice. She took off at a full gallop, weaving in between the mineral columns, trying to get away from whatever was attacking them. Hairtrigger was right above her, doing his best to cover Mystic from the air. But with all the stalactites hanging down, and his malfunctioning eye hampering his depth-perception, the pegasus could barely keep pace with her without risking a collision.

"I can't see nothing," he yelled. He swung his gaze and his slingshot this way and that, but the targets refused to show themselves. "Gimme more light!"

Mystic brightened her horn, pushing the shadows back. Most of them, at least. The light revealed shapes all around them, chasing them as they fled through the cave. Their pursuers were amorphous, shrouded in a cloak of impenetrable darkness. Whether by sorcery or artifice, the shadows themselves flowed around them like a thick, billowing smoke. At least a half-dozen of the fiends were after them, bounding easily around any obstacles between them and their prey. The shadow-beasts of her nightmare, Mystic thought in horror.

"Duck!" Hairtrigger screamed from above.

The unicorn did so, throwing herself to the ground a mere instant before one of the creatures released another hail of gem-shards at her. As it did, the flowing veil around it waned for a moment and Mystic caught fleeting glimpses of teeth, claws, and murderous yellow eyes. She started running again.

Overhead, the orange pegasus had himself just managed avoid a shot from their attackers, darting behind a stone spike for cover. As soon as he flew out from behind it, he launched a cupcake in the direction the shot had come from. The sweet struck one of the shadow-beasts mid-leap, and it tumbled to the ground. He saw the cloak begin to melt away, but there was no time to get a good look before the remaining threats demanded his attention again.

Another barrage of twinkling crystals rushed up to meet Hairtrigger from below, with only an instant to react. Banking sharply and executing a quick roll, he managed to dodge most of them. But not all.

The few that didn't miss sheared a clump of feathers cleanly off his right wing. The sudden pain and loss of flight stability sent him into a sharp dive, and he glanced off a stalactite before crashing the cave floor.

Mystic heard the impact, looked back, and spotted the Arbitrotter's crumpled form on the ground behind her. She skidded to a stop. "Hairtrigger!"

The beasts were closing in on both of them. She could hear their excited panting, their frenzied snarls. Mystic rushed to his side. "We need to move! Now! I'm not going anywhere without you."

More screeching signaled another volley of incoming shards, with no time to move the stunned Arbitrotter. Mystic's horn flared and she tore a slab of stone from the cave floor, holding it up as a shield. The projectiles harmlessly peppered the rock, and with a desperate cry, she flung the whole slab back at the shooter. It, whatever it was, had been caught in the path of the sailing boulder, and the impact scattered its shroud in a puff of smoky shadows. The rock kept flying, carrying them both into the dark beyond Mystic's vision. A violent crash assured her there would be one less threat to worry about.

Hairtrigger grunted as the unicorn propped him up. “Don’t... don’t you worry your pretty little—gah!— head none, missy,” he said, testing his injury, “just—argh!— just clipped my wings, is all.”

He had landed on his wings rather hard. From the shooting pain he felt when he carefully folded them to his sides, the pegasus knew he probably wouldn’t be able to fly for some time. He shook the spots from his vision and looked a trembling Mystic in the eye. “I’m gonna lay down some cover,” he said, “and you’re gonna keep your head down, and keep moving. I’ll be right behind you.”

Mystic nodded. The tense confidence with which Hairtrigger spoke was probably the one thing at the moment keeping the unicorn from paralyzing in fear. She had seen her share of scary as a Throne Agent, but having to fight off her own nightmares-come-to-life set a new bar.

“Alright, go!”

Two cupcakes in quick succession sent the closest of the shadowy attackers back behind cover. Mystic lowered her head and charged toward the largest gap she could see. As she gained speed, she charged a little magical “covering fire” of her own. Crackling lightning discharged from her horn at random, turning her into a cross between a freight-train and a thundercloud. One of the fiends, lacking the good sense to keep his head down, tried to bar the unicorn’s path. It was instantly fried.

The orange pegasus fell in directly behind Mystic, galloping along in the one spot that was spared from the electric assault. Together, they broke free of the tightening circle, and the chase began anew.

Unfortunately, this only seemed to encourage their pursuers. Despite the apparent losses they had taken, the shadow-beasts no longer had to contend with Hairtrigger’s air-support. They didn’t even appear to be putting much effort into attacking anymore, merely matching the exhausted ponies’ pace. Their shots became lazy, aiming only enough to force their targets dodge them.

Repeatedly, Mystic tried to break one way or the other, only to be rebuked by incoming fire. Every attempt that the ponies made to navigate out of the cavern’s maze of stalagmites found an ambush already waiting in their path. *They’re toying with us*, Mystic concluded as she veered away from another scattershot of gem-shards. *They’re corralling us like animals.*

The obvious question was where were they being corralled? She didn't have to wait long for the answer. As the green unicorn peered into the darkness before her, she found that suddenly there were no more obstacles in her path. And no more floor, either.

She buckled her knees, dug her hooves into the ground, and skidded to a stop. Hairtrigger wasn't prepared for her abrupt deceleration, and almost tackled Mystic into the gaping chasm in front of them. The two had nearly run straight over a cliff.

Even when Mystic lit her horn as brightly as she could, neither of them could see either the bottom of the great subterranean abyss, or even the other side. There was nothing but a void. A void they were now cornered against.

The two turned their backs to the cliff. Having no place else to run, there was no choice but to face the enemy head-on. Mystic prepared her magic, and Hairtrigger loaded a fresh cupcake into his slingshot.

One by one, five shadow-creatures appeared before them, like circling predators. A single shape approached, the creature stepping out of the black cloud that cloaked it. For the first time, Mystic clearly saw the face of the monsters that had been hounding her since her dream the night before. She almost wished that she hadn't.

It was a hideous thing, proportioned like some sort of freakish ape: Bipedal, but with almost comically short legs and long, massive forearms that could just as easily reach the ground for walking on all fours. Though hunched, it was still taller than either of the ponies. The head had vaguely canine features, floppy ears, bulging eyes and a pronounced underbite. Yellow fangs glistened with its saliva in a sinister grin.

One by one, the shrouds concealing the other zoono-beasts evaporated as well. Suddenly the interference afflicting Hairtrigger's bionic eye was gone, and he could see them all plain as day. Each was clad in thin, hard plates that interlocked into suits of dull, grey armor covering their chests. He wondered if the various spikes and blades protruding seemingly at random were purely ornamental, or if they were intended to be used. Their wiry fur had various earthy tones of brown, tan and grey, though the pegasus couldn't tell if that was their actual colors, or if they were simply encrusted in filth.

The one standing before them, apparently their leader, fixed his gaze on Mystic. "You *magic* pony," it said in broken Low Equestrian. Its voice was bestial and grating to the ponies' ears. They gave it no response.

Its grin widened. "Magic pony is good," it said, turning to its comrades. "Magic pony can find gems! *Very* precious." The other dog-creatures' short, spiked tails wagged with excitement. "We bring to Bismutt."

Hairtrigger planted himself firmly in front of Mystic, fuming. "Ain't gonna happen, partner. Not a goldfish's chance in the desert."

The leader lifted a weapon, a device very much resembling a crossbow. It dropped a handful of colorful gems into the top of the weapon's mechanism. Then with a quick look up, it aimed and fired at the cave ceiling directly above the ponies. In an instant, the shot disappeared into the darkness, the faint sound of its impact echoing back down a moment later.

Hairtrigger took a step back. "What in tarna-"

Before he could finish, he was drowned out by a deep, ominous groan and a loud cracking noise overhead. Straining his enhanced vision, the pegasus saw fractures threading across the damaged stalactites hanging above. Dust and pebbles rained down, followed immediately by several tons of stone.

"Look out!" he shouted. Unable to see as well as him, Mystic couldn't tell exactly what was coming, or where it would land. And backed up against the precipice, she had hardly anywhere to go.

The rocks fell.

For the second time, Mystic found herself with Hairtrigger on top of her. She was lying face down, and could sense his body standing above her. When the dust cleared, she looked back to where she had been standing just seconds ago. It was a huge pile of debris.

"Th-thanks," she said.

He shook the chips of stone from his back. "Somepony's gotta take care of you."

The green unicorn smiled weakly and attempted to stand up. But when she tried, a searing pain shot up her leg. She looked back again and saw that it was pinned under one of the huge boulders. "I... I'm stuck."

"Hang on," Hairtrigger said, already trying to free her, "we'll get you out of there, quicker than you can say 'Golden Throne of Canterlot.'"

No stranger to combat injury, Mystic was about to just grit her teeth and levitate the boulder herself. But something else landed in front of her. A small, metal orb clinked along the ground before rolling to a stop right before Mystic's face. With a click, it opened, and it sprayed out a cloud of noxious mist.

Hairtrigger reared back to avoid the gas, but trapped as she was, Mystic couldn't help but breathe in a lungful. She coughed and in seconds she began to feel dizzy, her vision blurring and her pulse quickening. It had been a big dose; whatever it was supposed to do, she was going to find out.

Hairtrigger turned to face the lead zoonos who had thrown the gas grenade. He stamped the ground and snorted, head down, ears back. The leader stood back, and the other beasts reactivated their cloaks, once again disappearing from the pegasus's vision as the shadows enveloped them. They charged from every direction.

On the ground, Mystic could only watch her companion take on the creatures alone. The poison, rather than dull her senses as she might have expected, actually seemed to make them sharper, more acutely aware of every sound and movement. In her eyes, tricks of the light became new horrors prowling for her. Echoes of her own fevered panting morphed into the tortured screams of invisible victims. Pain and panic consumed her reality like a wildfire, fuelled by the psychotropics coursing through her veins.

When she looked at the shadow-beasts, she saw them as demons. Her hallucinations blended their real forms with her nightmares, combining the worst features of both and magnifying them a hundredfold.

She also saw Hairtrigger differently. His luminator was still on, its bright beam flashing in all directions as he fought. In her impaired state, he appeared to Mystic as an avenging angel, a shining incarnation of the

Princess's divine fury. It was only slightly less terrifying a vision than the enemy he clashed with.

The Arbitrotter was losing ground to the beasts. They were faster than any pony he had ever fought, and stronger too. They were so close, their shrouds so thick around him, that he was completely blind. He thought about breaking away, engaging them at range where he might have an advantage. But that would leave Mystic exposed, and that was unacceptable. So he tried to hold them back

Finally, a clawed fist caught him in the muzzle and he went reeling. Another sent him to the cave floor. Two of the creatures picked him up by his elbows, dragging the struggling pony over to their leader.

"One-eye pony fights hard," it said with a self-satisfied smirk. Then the zoonos barked something in its own crude language to its minions, to which they cackled in delight. "But pony's wing is hurt. Hurt pony can't work. And pony that can't work is no good."

They carried the beaten pegasus toward the cliff's edge.

Mystic couldn't bear to watch, covering her eyes. "Please," she whimpered, "please no..."

"S'all right... little lady," Hairtrigger said between heaving breaths. "Ain't nothing's... gonna happen to ya... and that's the honest truth. Promise."

They cast him over the edge.

Silence filled the long moments that followed. She was glad he didn't scream; it would have been too much for her. She was also spared the sound of him hitting the bottom, so deep was the chasm. The quiet was instead broken by her muffled sobs. When she finally lifted her hooves from her eyes again, the shadow-monsters were standing around her. The leader crouched down to look her in the face.

"Is magic pony's leg stuck?" it taunted melodiously. The rancid stench on its breath made Mystic gag. She looked into its eyes, and in them saw reflections of her own wildest, darkest fears. A dagger made of serrated diamond appeared in its paw. "Good thing magic pony doesn't need leg to find gems."

The green unicorn's eyes went wide and her sobs became a wail. She thrashed against the boulder, like any wild animal caught in a trap. The artificially-heightened fear and despair had taken away all rationality, and kept her from concentrating on even the simplest of spells.

The minions held her down. Mystic cringed, waiting for the cut.

Instead, there was a furious gust of wind. In the blink of an eye, two of the creatures went flying, hit by something too fast for Mystic to follow. They sailed over the edge of the abyss, their shrieks echoing long after they disappeared into the void.

An orange blur swooped in and tackled a third zoonos. It was flung back into a stalactite with such force that it demolished the pillar, and was buried under its rubble. The remaining dog-monsters stepped back in alarm. The hovering figure of a pegasus confronted them. It was Hairtrigger.

He fluttered laboriously to the ground, favoring his clipped wing. "Y'all thought you could take me by the horns, huh?" he said, panting with rage. "I reckon y'all weren't ready for the ride."

Having seen more than half its group decimated in mere seconds, the last minion lost its nerve and tried to run. The enraged pony pounced on the fleeing creature, pummeling it with his bare hooves. He kept hitting it, even after the body under him had gone limp.

A huge paw seized the pegasus's injured wing. He was instantly blinded by the pain, long enough for the zoonos leader to throw him to the ground. With a huge claw around his neck, the creature held him there. Every time he struggled, the monster stomped on the wing, making him howl in agony.

"One-eye pony doesn't know when to *die*," it hissed, bringing its shard-weapon to bear in the other claw. He aimed it in Hairtrigger's face.

There was a loud *splat* noise. The dog-monster's face went slack, and he slumped, falling face-first into the cave floor. There was a mess of pie all over the back of his head.

Behind him, stood Caballus.

Chapter 11

Hairtrigger yanked away the lifeless claw still clutching his neck. “Not saying I’m ungrateful or nothing, but did you have to cut it so close?”

“You’re welcome,” the Inquisipony said with a hint of amusement. He bent down to tend to the Arbitrotter’s injuries.

“You know what?” the pegasus said. “I think I might owe the good folks of Applemattox an apology.”

Caballus’s amusement grew. “And why might that be?”

“I reckon the Diggers might be real after all,” Hairtrigger replied, nodding toward the grotesque body.

Roughshod appeared beside his employer, out of breath. When he shined his own luminator down on Hairtrigger, he gave the pegasus a quizzical look. “There you are. We’ve been looking all over for you. Damn, you look like somepony worked you over good.” He started looking for a med-kit in his saddlebags.

“Don’t fuss over me, you idiot,” the Arbitrotter said irritably, “see to the filly.” He pointed a hoof in Mystic’s direction.

Roughshod did just that, and rushed to the unicorn’s side. But she recoiled from him, not even recognizing her close friend. In her toxic haze, everypony was an enemy, and every movement was an attack. She pulled so hard trying to get away, Roughshod was sure he heard a sickening snap.

“Relax, Sweet Pea! It’s me,” the stallion said in dismay. He tried to get a look at her leg, but she snarled at him. “Jeez, what’s the matter with you?”

“The Diggers used some sort of gas weapon on her,” Hairtrigger explained. “Looks like it spooked her clean out of her wits.”

“Give her a sedative,” said Caballus. “The poison will have to run its course, but we need to keep her from hurting herself while it does.”

Roughshod nodded, and procured a needle from his med-kit. With some difficulty, he managed to inject his uncooperative patient with it. At the same time, Caballus prepared a painkiller for Hairtrigger, and gave it to him right at the base of his wing. Both of the wounded ponies started to relax. Mystic soon stopped struggling enough for Roughshod to roll away the boulder from her leg so he could set about binding it. "It's definitely broken," he reported.

"So is this wing," said Caballus, "and probably a few ribs. How much Bone-Mending Brew did you pack in there?"

Roughshod rifled through the med-kit, pulling out a small vial filled with a purple liquid. "Not enough for all that, I don't think."

"Give it to her. I'll be fine," Hairtrigger insisted. He tried to stand, but a sharp stab in his side proved him wrong.

Caballus frowned. "You're both dead weight if you can't travel. Give Mystic enough to walk, and the rest to Hairtrigger. We can get them patched up properly once we're back on the ship."

Rolling Mystic onto her back, Roughshod poured a little more than half the potion into her mouth. With a little coaxing, the torpid unicorn swallowed it. A dim glow suffused the flesh of her fetlock. The joint stretched and twisted as the bone set itself back into place, popping and cracking as it went. By the time the light faded, it had fused back into working order.

Hairtrigger drank the remaining potion. His chest and right wing shone with an inner light as the fractures in his hollow bones sealed themselves. Once it was finished, he gave his wings and torso an experimental stretch. They still hurt; the bones may have been repaired—for the most part, anyway—but the scrapes and bruises still remained.

While Hairtrigger got shakily to his feet, Caballus kicked the creature's body onto its back, examining his kill.

"What in the wide, wide world of Equestria is it?" Hairtrigger asked. "Besides ugly."

Caballus shook his head. "Your guess is as good as mine. The Ordo Hereticolt usually hunts heretics, not zoonos. You probably know more about 'Diggers' than I do."

"All I know are the stories, the tall tales about them. They say ever since the first settlers came out the edge of the sub-sector and put down roots, they were raided by monsters that lived out in from the Rocklands. Strike without warning, disappear without a trace; all the spooky story clichés. For as long as anypony can remember, they're sort of just what folks blame when anything bad happens. If something breaks right when you need it, you'll say '*the Diggers must've broke it,*' or whenever somepony would go missing and never come back, folks would say '*the Diggers must've got him.*' Whenever I took to bickering with my dear old Ma, she would tell me to cut it out or the Diggers would come drag me deep underground, and make me work in their mines forever, never to see sun again." He shook his head. "And to think, eventually I stopped believing her."

Caballus shrugged. "You'd be surprised how often legends from the past contain a kernel of truth. The archives of the Friendquisition contain a number of accounts from Inquisiponies who found themselves investigating entities that were supposedly fictional."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Nothing I'm at liberty to discuss," Caballus said with a smirk.

By then, Roughshod had joined the two stallions again, with Mystic draped over his back. With the tranquilizer finally overpowering the poison, the unicorn had fallen into a fitful sleep. The drug couldn't end her nightmares, but it had returned them to where they belonged. "Looks like we can move her now," he said with some relief.

His weak smile belied the stress visible in his eyes, however. Caballus had seen the look before. It was one his companion often wore after he had finished administering first aid; the point at which nothing more could be done. All he could do now was wait for her to get better, and waiting made Roughshod feel helpless. Not to mention distracted. *Then we won't wait*, Caballus decided.

“Right then,” the Inquisipony said, “we should get moving. Roughshod and I had just discovered a tunnel that appeared to lead out of this place when we heard the commotion you two were making. This way.”

It took a little bit of searching, but Caballus managed to backtrack to the place where the cavern wall opened into a narrow passage. It was even narrower than the first one Hairtrigger and Mystic had landed in, wide enough for one pony to walk comfortably, but not two. It was also tall enough for even Roughshod to have no lack of headroom. Caballus went first, followed by the hobbling Hairtrigger, and Roughshod bringing up the rear with Mystic on his back.

“So what now?” Hairtrigger asked after a few minutes.

“Huh?” Roughshod asked.

“What do we do now?” the Arbitrotter repeated. “Things ain’t exactly been going according to the plan we set out with this morning. The heretics are running the town, the ground beneath their hooves is crawling with Diggers, and we’re trapped down here, cut off from help by both of them. I’m wondering what we’re fixin’ to do once we get out of this cave.”

Roughshod cocked his head, as if he’d never even considered the plan at all.

“The plan,” Caballus said confidently from the front, “hasn’t changed. Find the enemy, and destroy the enemy. It’s just our luck that there’s quite a bit more ‘enemy’ than we anticipated. Not only do we have to contend with Sniffles and the Children, but we’ve got this new zoonos threat to worry about, too.”

“Sniffles?” Roughshod asked, eyebrow raised.

“Yes, that’s the name of the Traitor Marine. He... introduced himself to me—though without his armor on, mind you—back in Tier’s warehouse. Right before that damn phoenix tried to kill me. He was the true Cheat-worm supplier, and I suspect he’s the one who’s behind the Children’s resurgence. He must have fled during the first purge, and hidden out here in Applemattox, eventually spreading his influence throughout the entire town.

“Anyway, what *has* changed is the scale of the plan. This is no longer small enough to contain ourselves. Once we reach the surface, we’ll signal Fyzzix for extraction, and then requisition some more firepower. I should think a full regiment of Equestrian Guard will be enough to take care of the townsfolk. And my counterparts in the Ordo Zoonos will certainly be interested in the Diggers. If anypony knows how best to deal with hostile creatures, it’s them. With those reinforcements, we can purge the taint from this town, and the infestation beneath it.”

“I can’t wait,” Roughshod muttered. “Maybe we can round up some of those cultist scumbags for some good old-fashioned Friendquisition *‘interrogation’* while we’re at it.”

There was a certain edge of... contempt in the stallion’s remarks, the likes of which Caballus hadn’t heard from him in a long time. Roughshod was usually the most easygoing of the team, even in combat situations. Especially in combat situations, actually. But ever since receiving their current assignment back in Hippopolis, the Inquisipony had noted a few times when his bodyguard hadn’t quite been himself. And always when the topic was the Children, which Caballus supposed wasn’t really surprising, all things considered.

Satisfied with the plan, Hairtrigger simply nodded in assent. Having little else to discuss, the team fell into a careful, deliberate pace through the tunnel. Though it snaked left and right, it did appear to generally slope upwards, providing the ponies cause for cautious optimism.

“I think it’s time for a rest,” Caballus suggested, after a couple hours of hiking.

Both of the ponies behind him agreed, and they all set their burdens down on the tunnel floor. Rations and a small canteen from Caballus’s saddle bag were passed around for the three to share, and some were saved for Mystic when she woke up.

Without the noise of clopping hooves bouncing off the walls, it was suddenly very quiet in the tunnel. Quiet enough for Caballus to hear a faint mumbling.

“Does anypony else hear that?” he asked.

“Oh, that? That’s Sweet Pea,” Roughshod replied, gesturing to Mystic lying on the ground in front of him. “She’s been talking in her sleep on and off for a while now. I can’t really tell what she’s saying, but it sounds like she might be coming out of it soon.”

Caballus got up and squeezed past Hairtrigger to where she lay. He knelt down, scrutinizing her face, and straining to listen. The green pony had stopped grappling with her phantom attackers an hour ago, but she still looked so scared, so fragile. Her eyes darted wildly under their lids, and her expression shifted back and forth between cowering and pleading.

“And... and yea,” she murmured, “though I stand as b-but a candle before the darkness, I... I have no fear, for thou art with me. My f-faith is my strength, and it shines as though the sun at dawn...”

Caballus pulled the hood off her head and stroked her blue mane. In his most reassuring tone, he recited with her. “As surely as the day scatters the night, while I have faith, I shall vanquish any foe.”

Beneath his touch, her trembling eased, and her own voice grew in confidence. “Sustain and protect me, O Princess, that I might carry your light wherever evil dwells, and bask in your glory eternal.”

The young mare’s face became serene, and her eyes fluttered open. “C-Caballus?”

“That was from *The Psalms of Champions*, wasn’t it?” he said, smiling down on her. “By Saint Radiance? It’s one of my favorites.”

Mystic returned the smile “Yeah, it was. I say it sometimes when I feel... ahem... when I feel scared.” She looked around, seeing the rest of the group as well. “Was... was I asleep? I feel like I’ve been...” She trailed off as she finally noticed her surroundings and realized where she was. Her smile soured slightly. “I almost thought that being chased by those... those shadow-dog-monsters was all a bad dream.”

“Fraid not, missy,” Hairtrigger sighed.

“Here,” said Roughshod, handing her the food and water they’d set aside for her. “Let’s get you back on your hooves. Not to mention off of my back. I’m not an ambulance, you know.”

The stallions collected their equipment while Mystic inhaled the provisions. It took a little teamwork, but they helped her up into a standing position, where she tested the injured leg with a little weight. It hurt, but she could travel mostly unaided.

At a pace that accommodated their walking wounded, the team returned to their journey through the passageway. At the back of the procession, Roughshod's mind began to wander. The monotonous march provided little in the way of distraction, so he found other ways to occupy himself. First he counted his ammunition, so he knew exactly how many pies he had left, and in what flavors. He double checked them, and then triple checked just to be sure. He refitted his flak armor, loosening and retightening straps that had shifted while they walked, until they once again hugged him properly.

Roughshod repeated simple diversions like these until even they became as tedious as staring at the omnipresent, rough-hewn tunnel walls. Turning his luminator's beam to the wall, the brown pony silently cursed them for being the only thing to look at. But actually looking at them, something piqued his interest.

"Hey Hairtrigger, I'm guessing they're called 'Diggers' for a reason, right?"

"Well yeah," the pegasus replied over his shoulder, "I reckon it's because they dig. The stories say they live underground, and my guess is, down here, there ain't much else to do."

"Check out the walls," Roughshod said. "They're all scratched."

The other ponies stopped and shined their lights on the wall as well.

"You're right," Hairtrigger said, his eye magnifying the texture of the stone. "It's not smooth like the rest of the cave, not natural. But what's that mean?"

Roughshod scratched his chin. "Well you got a look at their claws, right?"

The Arbitrotter gave him a deadpan look. "Yeah, I got a *good* look at their claws. Especially when they were wringing my neck all homicidal-like."

“Well,” Roughshod elaborated, “with claws like that, I’m guessing they can dig their own tunnels like this one with their bare paws. Might be how they got a reputation for attacking out of nowhere, and vanishing afterward: find a cave under the target or make your own, then pop up, snatch up everypony in sight, and you’re gone.”

“I’d have never pegged the disappearances on the Diggers if I hadn’t seen one with my own eye,” Hairtrigger shrugged. “That explains the dirt piles at the crime scenes. They must fill their holes in after they leave.”

“But why?” Mystic said, giving voice to the next obvious question. “Why do they take ponies?”

As if in answer, a noise echoed from up ahead of them. It was faint, but it sounded very distinctly like a scream. A scream of agony.

“I have a feeling we’re about to find out,” Caballus said.

Chapter 12

The *Glücksritter* may have been a small airship, but it was an ancient one. As much an heirloom as an aircraft, it had seen service under the command of countless generations of Rogue Traders. And being at one time among the premier merchantmen of the esteemed Ver Kaufer Trade Fleet, it was well-maintained despite its age.

The interior of the captain's quarters was a match for any vessel in terms of opulence, save perhaps those of an Admiral of the Equestrian Navy. The walls were paneled and trimmed with exotic hardwoods, giving the room a warm, inviting atmosphere. Several bookshelves stood floor to ceiling, stacked with rare volumes on a variety of subjects. Fine tapestries and oil paintings adorned the walls, and a modest fireplace crackled quietly off to one side, adding its flickering light to the decor. One could easily believe that they were standing in the study of a noblepony's manor house, rather than on a ship.

In one corner, Feuervogel perched on a bejeweled roost engraved with his name in flowery script. He preened himself lazily, occasionally plucking a worn feather from his plumage, which would ignite and burn to nothing before it even touched the floor.

A large, oak desk stood in the center of the room, a stack of parchments and data-scrolls scattered on top of it. There were cargo manifests, accounting ledgers, regional charts and the like, all haphazardly piled on one another. An ink jar and a few quills lay at the ready, under the watchful gaze of a glass bunny-shaped paperweight and a small marble bust of an old, bearded captain.

Several increasingly loud footsteps preceded a knock on the heavy wooden door.

"Come in," called the pony sitting at the desk in a tall-backed chair, facing away from the door.

Sniffles entered, only barely fitting through the normal pony-sized frame. He came to a halt a couple paces before the desk, and snorted

sharply. It still wasn't enough to keep the slime on his nose from dripping onto the plush carpeting. The spot where it landed hissed and smoked.

"Do try not to damage our accommodations too badly, if you can help it," the seated pony said without even turning around. "We are only borrowing them, after all."

"Of course," Sniffles replied. He wiped his nose on his power armor.

A book on the shelf, titled the *Bestiaria Prohibitae*, began to radiate a twinkling blue light, and it gently floated off the shelf over to the desk. "It's a shame Tier couldn't have been more useful. He has fairly good taste in proscribed texts."

"Oh, I don't know," Sniffles chuckled, "Last I saw of him, he was getting along with his new friends quite swimmingly."

Somewhere belowdecks, a loud, heavy clang reverberated up through the bulkheads. For a moment, the whole ship vibrated like a tuning fork. Feuervogel squawked his displeasure.

"Is everything prepared?" the other pony asked, when the noise subsided.

"The Children of Applemattox are all in their shelters, in expectation of another Digger raid."

"And our associates?"

"I was just about to complete our transaction with them," said Sniffles. "Once I return, we can depart."

"Excellent. Make *sure* you get what we came here for. This is a very critical juncture for us, and I don't want *any* mistakes."

The screech and groan of twisting metal rang beneath their hooves. Several crew-ponies ran past the doorway, yelling and hauling firefighting gear.

Sniffles ignored them, and snorted back his runny nose once again. "Don't worry, my friend. I don't foresee any complications whatsoever." He turned to leave.

“What about the Inquisipony?” the other said, stopping the Traitor Marine in his tracks.

“He... got away...” Sniffles wasn’t particularly upset to deliver the report, but he did sound a little disappointed. “I had him cornered in one of the shelters, but the unicorn with him managed to teleport them all away.”

“Did she?” the pony mused. His grin bared his needle-sharp fangs. “Splendid! I must admit, I was beginning to worry that these Equestrian lapdogs would be the usual crew of flunkies. I can’t wait to see what they’re *truly* capable of. Keep an eye out for them. We’ll be seeing them again *very* soon. Most assuredly.”

Sniffles bowed, and turned back to the door.

An explosion rocked the *Glücksritter*, sending dozens of books tumbling off the shelves. The entire ship filled with a bellow of primal, unbridled rage. Feuervogel hid his head under a wing, and Sniffles winced. The glass paperweight rattled off the desk and shattered into pieces. Echoes of the roar lingered in the corridors of the ship like a vengeful spirit, for far longer than seemed natural.

“Sniffles,” the seated pony called after the Marine, “why don’t you bring Brassbit with you. He’s getting a little stir-crazy down there in the hold.”

“Come on,” Caballus whispered urgently. He dashed ahead to the next bend in the tunnel, taking point. There was a weak light around the corner, suggesting that they might finally have reached the end. The unintelligible shouts seemed to recede from them, until there was a loud clang, and it was quiet again

Roughshod pushed ahead of the others and took up a position right next to the Inquisipony. Hairtrigger and Mystic limped behind them as quickly as they could. Both were panting from exertion by the time they had caught up.

Caballus edged forward, hugging the wall and peeking around the corner. A long hallway lay beyond. He looked back at Roughshod, and the two nodded to one another. They both drew pies and stealthily crossed the threshold.

Caballus scanned the hall in an instant. Left. Right. Up. All clear.

The corridor was empty of dog-monsters, but the ponies kept their guard while they advanced. At irregular intervals, large gems protruded from the walls, which gave off a cold, pale light, not quite like any magic the ponies had ever encountered before. At the far end stood a rusty, heavy-looking door, and in between, the hallway resembled a prison block. Numerous cells were cut deep into the rock and covered with iron-barred hatches.

Roughshod cautiously approached the first cell. The dim gem-lights penetrated only just beyond the bars, so he shined his luminator inside.

“Sweet Throne of Canterlot!” he gasped.

Caballus appeared beside him, as did Hairtrigger and Mystic a moment later. They too turned their lights to see what was inside. Huddled against the far wall of the cell were three shapes. At a glance, they could have been mistaken for some kind of wretched animals being held in captivity. Cuts, bruises and scrapes covered their entire skins. They were dirty, mangy, and looked dangerously malnourished. But when the trio saw their quivering, terrified faces, there was no question: they were ponies.

Caballus walked to the next nearest cells, and found more of the same. Some still had rags of clothing, while others barely had any fur left at all. Each was pale, skeletal, and looked too weak to stand. The stench was horrendous.

Roughshod called to them. “Hang on. We’ll get you guys out of here.” He found the lock on the door and began trying to force it open. But rather than greet him as a savior, the imprisoned ponies began to shriek and moan.

Hairtrigger stopped him with a hoof on his shoulder. “Look big guy, I’m thinking we should let them be. They’re makin’ an awful racket.”

Roughshod looked at the pegasus like he was crazy. "What? No! We can't just leave these ponies in this zoonos-infested hell-hole. Just look at 'em, for Celestia's sake!" He turned around and bucked at the bars with all his strength. Each loud strike bent them a little further, and drove the prisoners into even greater fits of panic.

"Hey," Hairtrigger hissed, "we can't afford to go letting every damn Digger in these caves know we're here just to haul these ponies around. We've got problems aplenty on our saddles without picking up any more."

"Oh, don't give me those horse-apples," Roughshod snapped. "We *can* help them. I know we'll find a way." The stallion turned to Caballus. "What do you say, boss?"

The Inquisipony answered Roughshod with sympathetic eyes, but also a shake of his head. "The mission comes first, Shod. You know that. I don't like it any more than you do, but we don't have the resources to rescue them right now. It won't matter if we break them all out if we're captured in the process. The best way to help them is to get out of here as fast as we can, and hope they're still here when we return with reinforcements."

Roughshod's frustration started to cool, if only slightly. They were all making sense to him, but that still didn't make him feel any better about it. "I... I just hate leaving ponies behind," he said, hanging his head.

"You know what's at stake," Caballus said grimly. "If we fail, the Diggers *and* the Children will have free rein to cause even more harm than they already have. If it were you in there, you would tell us to go without you."

The brown pony considered the thought, and finally relented. He managed a half-hearted smile. "Yeah, I would. And you'd do it, too."

Caballus smirked back at him. "For you... I might have to mull it over."

The team made their way down the hall, passing dozens of darkened hollows, each holding at least a few unfortunate prisoners. Caballus and Hairtrigger kept their eyes on the exit, hoping that nothing came through the door, but prepared if something did. Mystic just tried to look anywhere

else, avoiding the anxious, pleading eyes that followed them as they walked by.

But Roughshod looked. He shined his light into every single miserable pen. Maybe he couldn't save them, but damn it if he didn't look somepony in the eye when he had to abandon them. They deserved that much, at least.

As they approached the broad iron door at the end, he found a pony in the last cell staring back at him. They had all stared of course, but this one didn't hide in the back like the others, didn't have the same look of feral desperation. This prisoner simply sat there by the bars, a tired, bitter look in his eyes.

Roughshod paused to give him a second look. Yellow coat, sky blue mane, thick mustache...

"Tier?"

The rest of the group perked up, and when they followed Roughshod's dumbfounded gaze, they recognized him too.

"I was expecting to see you again, Inquisipony," said Tier Ver Kaufer, "only I thought zat it would be when you were thrown in here with me." Even in filthy cage, the Rogue Trader talked with the lofty air of a nobleborn.

"So this here is the Rogue Trader?" Hairtrigger said, unimpressed. "He don't look so tough."

"Without his phoenix, he's not," Roughshod replied.

"So what are you here to do, Inquisipony?" Tier asked. "Vill you break me out of zis dungeon just to drag me to your own? I imagine it would actually be an improvement." The disheveled merchant appeared as though he wished to laugh at his own joke, but lacking the strength, he just moaned instead.

"How about we skip a few steps and I just interrogate you right here?" said Caballus, impatiently.

“And if I cooperate, will you help me?”

“We’ll see,” was all the answer Caballus was willing to give. He wasn’t about to start making deals with traitorous lowlifes. It would set a bad precedent. “How did you get here?”

“Ze same way everypony gets here: My leg is broken. I cannot work.”

“Ponies that can’t work are no good,” Hairtrigger muttered, recalling the words involuntarily.

Tier nodded. “So you’ve met zem, have you? Ze ‘Unterhunde?’”

Ignoring his question, Caballus continued with his own. “How were you captured?”

“After I fled from *you*,” he said accusingly, “Sniffles claimed I had failed ze Children by leading you to zem. Those who fail ze Children, or who resist zem, no longer receive zeir ‘protection’ from ze Unterhunde.”

“The gangsters out behind the bar,” Mystic interrupted from over by the door, “the ones I... the ones that attacked us, they were more afraid of ‘botching the job’ than they were of my magic. And they were *terrified* of magic.”

“And Sniffles mentioned that they threw ‘unbelievers’ into a hole in the ground,” Caballus said. “I bet it was a hole that led straight to the Diggers.”

Roughshod grabbed the scruff of Tier’s tattered uniform through the bars. “What work do the Diggers make you do?”

The battered pony shuddered. “Zey send us into ze gem mines. Some are forced to pick at ze rock with zeir bare hooves. Others must haul cartfuls of gems ten times zeir own size. Everypony is starved und beaten, until zey eventually break. Then zey are brought here, to ze torture pens.”

He gestured with his eyes back down the hallway. “You’ve had a proper look around already, so I think you are familiar with zeir... *handiwork*.”

“Well, you don’t seem much worse for wear,” Hairtrigger sneered.

“I’ve only just been here a few days. I think. It’s getting harder to tell. Ze lucky ones die in ze mines. Ve weren’t so fortunate, so we must wait—perhaps weeks—for madness und death to finally claim us. Ze Unterhunde prefer to... get ze most out of zeir victims,” he said coldly.

Tier gave the orange pegasus a once-over before addressing Caballus again. “I don’t remember zis one. Is he new?”

“Indeed,” Caballus said. “He’s an Arbitrotter I met here in Applemattox who’s been tracking your activities for some time.”

“And now that I’ve finally got you cornered,” said Hairtrigger, taking over the interrogation for a moment, “I can find out why the Diggers seem to be hitched to you like a horse-drawn carriage.”

Tier sighed. “At ze behest of ze Children, I would mark out ze homesteads und outposts zat had ze strongest, healthiest und most defenseless residents for ze Unterhunde to raid.”

“Why you low down, dirty...” Hairtrigger seethed. “You... you just sold out unsuspecting pony folks to these zoonos freaks! To be worked and tortured to death in a sunless hole! How could you even sleep at night?”

“Atop a *mountain* of gemstones” Tier mocked. “You can’t accuse me of being corrupt und zen act surprised when I do... *unscrupulous* things. I am a Rogue Trader whose business is animals, und I know zat any creature can be bought for ze right price. These... uncouth settlers are hardly better zan beasts zemselves, und ze price zey fetch is *quite* good.”

Roughshod had to release Tier just to keep Hairtrigger from assaulting the yellow pony through the prison bars.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Mystic said. “The Children have been protecting Applemattox *from* the Diggers. Why would they ask Tier to work for them?”

“It’s a lie,” said Caballus as he pieced it together. “They create a threat by bribing the Diggers with easy targets, and then convert the entire town to the cult by pretending to keep them safe.”

“I told you,” Tier chuckled with some effort, “These Applemattox ponies are morons. Sniffles convinces zem to dig ‘shelters’ to hide in, und

zey scurry und hide at ze slightest rumor of danger. Zen, when I point ze Unterhunde elsewhere for prey, zey sing his praises.”

“If a pony’s faith in the Princess and his fellows is lost,” Caballus said, “the Great Darkness will cloud his mind with fear and doubt.” He leveled a scornful glare at Tier. “Or greed. I need names, places, plans, everything you know about the Children of Liberation. Then we’ll see what your cooperation buys you.”

“Quiet!” Mystic whispered sharply. She had her ear up to the large door. “Something’s coming!”

In an instant, Roughshod was beside her, listening for himself. “She’s right. Two contacts approaching.” Outside the door, a pair of crude voices barked and cackled, slowly growing louder.

Tier paled. “What? Zey can’t be back already,” he muttered frantically, “It’s too soon! Ze last one must have died too quickly. I’m next! You have to help me!”

Caballus said nothing, only drawing a pie and covering the door beside Hairtrigger who was doing the same. Mystic and Roughshod took up positions on either side of the door, and everypony held their breath.

The door swung open, and two gangly, spiny-armored Diggers walked through. They had hardly stepped over the threshold when they stopped and saw two ponies in the middle of the hallway. Their confusion only registered for a second before the ambush was sprung.

Roughshod leapt on the first Digger, locking it in a chokehold. The second felt the shard-thrower in its hands suddenly yanked away, and its chest enveloped in a sparkling green glow. Mystic’s magic slammed it into the bars of the nearest cell hard enough to bend them inward, and the last thing it saw when the stars cleared from its sight was the barrel of its own levitating weapon.

Despite Roughshod’s firm grip, he hadn’t counted on the Digger’s freakishly long arms, which managed to reach back and snag his armor. In a flash, Roughshod was on his back, the Digger holding a diamond blade to his throat.

Caballus's arm tensed. He didn't have a clean shot, not with Roughshod being held as a shield. The Digger grinned maliciously at the Inquisipony's hesitation, and then threw its head back in a bestial howl. But both of them were equally surprised when a high-velocity cupcake cut the noise short by filling the Digger's open jaws with sugary death. Hairtrigger lowered his empty slingshot.

Echoes of the howl gradually died in the depths of the tunnels beyond the door, one by one, until all was silent again. Even the sniveling prisoners held their breath. After a long moment, Caballus finally exhaled.

No sooner did he relax, than a chorus of howls answered back from the depths.

"Time to leave," said Caballus.

The others hastily agreed and gathered at the door.

"What? No! You can't leave me!" Tier cried. The last shreds of his haughty attitude were finally unraveling. Being abandoned again so soon after a hope of escape had appeared was just too much for him to take. "I... I'll tell you whatever you want to know! Just don't leave me here!"

"No time," Hairtrigger said with a hint of satisfaction, and he was right. The sound of slavering zoonos approaching could already be heard in the distance.

Tears welled in Tier's eyes. He beat on the bars of his cell futilely, before ending up in a sobbing heap. "Please... please!"

A feeling flickered in Caballus's heart in that moment. Sympathy? No, he thought. Traitors didn't deserve sympathy. Pity, then. Not a pity for Tier, but a pity that anypony could fall so far from Celestia's light. A pity that he had seen it happen before, to better ponies than Tier, and that he would undoubtedly see it again.

As fitting as it would have been to leave the Rogue Trader to the same fate he had doomed so many others to, Caballus couldn't risk it. Tier hadn't given away much, but it wouldn't take much more torture for the Diggers to find out what the Inquisipony had learned from him. And if word

got back to the Children that he had figured out their little scheme, it would make life as difficult above ground as below it.

There was only one way to prevent that in the few seconds he had, and it didn't involve breaking Tier out of his cell. His hoof crept toward his saddlebag as he contemplated it.

Tier's eyes followed it, and as he realized what it meant, rather than protest, he gave Caballus an approving nod.

"Tier Ver Kaufer," the Inquisipony finally announced, "you are guilty of treason against Equestria, the Princess, and all of Ponykind. There can be no forgiveness for such a crime, and only one punishment for such a criminal."

The sentence was a formality, one Caballus had scarcely any time for, but he wanted it to be clear he wasn't doing Tier a favor. Even if he was. Caballus held up a pie above the prisoner's head.

"If you ever have ze chance," Tier said, "could you just tell my Father zat I'm sorry I didn't return his ship to him myself."

"Perhaps I will," Caballus replied, and he carried out the sentence.