

# Breaking Bricks

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# Chapter 1

## In Which I Try To Make It Through the Morning

There's only one thing in the world worse than waking up hung over. And that thing is waking up hung over to an empty bedroom.

I came to long before I opened my eyes, and I opened my eyes long before I was actually awake. Part of it was due to the fact that the bed was warm and I couldn't remember whether I paid the heating bill this month, but mostly it was because I felt like somepony had beaten me over the head with a steel-plated two-by-four. That would be the gin coming back to bite me in the ass. Possibly a bit of the scotch too.

Some back alley of my mind picked up on the significant lack of body heat next to me and filed it away to be analyzed some other time, when my brain wasn't trying to dig its way out of my skull with a pickaxe. Later, I'd probably feel sad or something about once again waking up alone after a night of voyeuristic sin, but right now all I could remember was a frizzy red mane and a lacy black shawl that smelled alarmingly like limburger cheese. Coral was her name, or something like that. Maybe Cherry. Cauliflower?

I made the critical mistake of moving, and the choir of angels inside my head made sure I'd regret it for the next two hours. *Screw it*, I muttered into the pillow as a medley of power tools and rabid bears chimed in for the refrain. She was gone anyway. No sense moping around about something I wouldn't get back.

Candy. That was her name. Candy Heart. It still didn't explain the cheese, but it was better than nothing.

After giving the bears a few minutes to clear out, I went into my standard hangover operating procedure, which this morning consisted of flailing my legs around until I could slip my rear end and then my forelegs over the edge of the bed without moving my head off the pillow. After that, there isn't much else you can do besides move slowly and make sure the bed is right next to the bathroom, so I scraped my tongue over my bone-dry lips and lifted my head up with only a minimal amount of cursing. This wasn't a world-record hangover, then. That was good. The record was set on Solstice Eve four years ago, when I spent six hours naming each and

every one of the carpet fibers in the six-by-eight inch square of floor I could see from where I had collapsed around four and slept until around one the next afternoon. Today, I just ran into the doorjamb on the way out of the bedroom and wished I could go back and meet the pony who invented drinking, so I could gouge his eyes out with a rusty icepick. So all things considered, not a bad hangover at all.

Getting all the way into the shower would require many things, including the spatial awareness to actually wedge my whole body inside it, so I just settled for sticking my head under the stream of lukewarm water until the roaring in my ears died down into a purr. Dripping wet from the neck up and eyes still crusted over with Luna-only-knew-what, I swiveled around to face the mirror and tried to blink enough to get the glass to stop shimmering so brightly. Once it did, I gave myself a once-over just for kicks.

As was the pattern for the morning, things could've been worse. My coat was filthy and matted in more than one place, but at least none of it was dyed any color other than its natural Venetian red, and the symbol on my flank--a magnifying glass with a brown wooden handle--didn't look like it had been enhanced by any enthusiastic bar patrons. My mane, freshly soaked from the shower, was plastered all over my forehead in straggly brown clumps, but besides that looked normal enough as well. That left my teeth. I cracked a smile that ended up falling just short of a wince, and counted forty-two. All clear on this front, Brick. Time to get yourself cleaned up and ready for a bright, shiny new day of counting the hours until bedtime again. Be still, my heart.

The shower was still running and the water coming out of it wasn't getting any warmer, so I decided to skip the whole full-body wash thing and instead settle for a mouthful of tap water from the sink and the last fluoride-treated mint leaf from the jar I'd been meaning to refill for at least a week. With my headache starting to fade, I was able to think clearly enough to remember that I was hungry and there wasn't any food in my apartment, but not quite clearly enough to stop me from staring bleakly into the fridge at the impressive amount of didley-squat occupying the shelves. I also noticed that there didn't appear to be any cold air coming out either. Perfect. At least the milk had already gone bad days ago.

I paced around the room for a second looking for loose crumbs, then flopped on the couch and checked to see whether the cracks in the ceilings

had gotten any bigger overnight. When I saw that they hadn't, I let out a sigh. Ten minutes out of bed, and I had completely exhausted all but two possibilities for the day: stay here on this couch until I blacked out from hunger, or go in to the office and be a productive member of society. My throat twinged, and for a long moment the room spun circles around me. Starvation was actually looking like a half-decent idea at the moment.

But my stomach, the traitor, could only hold out for a few minutes. Last night's dinner was still as fuzzy as all the rest of last night, so I didn't really even know how long it'd been since I'd eaten anything. The answer my gut gave went something along the lines of "way too damn long", and that was good enough for me. With a groan from me and a louder groan from the couch, I rolled onto my hooves and started out, catching the strap of my satchel in my teeth as I passed it and swinging it onto my back before I nosed the door open and stepped out into the hallway.

Where the first thing I saw was a neatly stenciled piece of paper tacked over my peephole, with a heading written in neon-red ink that started out with the words "NOTICE OF EVICTION" and pretty much went downhill from there. Today was just going to be one of those days.

There are some ponies who like to confront their problems head-on. Y'know, beat up their critics, chase down the schlub who picks their pocket at the train station, all that gung-ho stallion-type shit. For somepony like me, meanwhile, everything has two solutions. The first one is reasonable, stoic debate, and the second one is drinking. It's generally very difficult to negotiate with an eviction notice, so I didn't see the point in getting all worked up about it. Besides, it wasn't like this was the first time it'd ever happened. This was Manehattan and I was the kind of schmuck who didn't know well enough to leave; the only thing in this city tighter than the money is the waistlines of all the upper class entrepreneurs who putter around in Dressage Park like little pressed and starched robots. That was the image everypony seemed to have of Manehattan: rich, cultured, tasteful, refined. Me, I lived in the real world, where the rent is cheap, the sauce is cheaper, and any building that doesn't have a homeless colt sleeping in the alley behind it is pretty much Canterlot Castle. The homeless colt behind my building was named Chester. Nice guy, actually, so long as you're upwind.

Oh, that's right: it wasn't *my* building anymore, was it? Well, such is life, I said to the empty hallway, right before swearing under my breath. You try to do one decent thing in this world, and all you get from it is a

never-ending headache and a neat little piece of paper telling you to buzz off and die, with warmest regards from the Management. They're always so polite when they kick you to the curb in Manehattan. Makes me miss Fillydelphia sometimes; when they kicked ponies to the curb, it usually involved actual kicking. I took one last look at the notice, and cussed again just to make sure it heard me.

"Well, good morning to you too, Dogwood."

I nearly bit my tongue in half snapping my jaw closed. My neighbors were what the brochures would call "affectionate", and I called "nosy as hell". Of course, this time it was mostly my fault, considering I'd been thinking aloud for the last thirty seconds or so and had just now noticed it. Funny, how I only ever do that when there are other ponies around to hear me.

"Howdy," I muttered at Mrs. Willow, who's roughly nine hundred years old and has been convinced for the last two of them that I'm her grown son Dogwood. I've never had the heart to tell her that her real son runs a mattress store across town and has his picture in the dictionary next to the word "asshole", so I mostly just take the free cookies and run. She's sweet enough, I guess, but I didn't think I'd miss her once I moved out. By the time I went through the nonexistent list of ponies I would miss once I moved out, she was talking again.

"Oh, I saw that nice young lady you had dinner with last night in the elevator this morning," she said perkily, her steel-gray curls hanging loosely over her sagging green skin. If Mrs. Willow had a word in the dictionary, it was definitely "naive". "She said she had someplace to go and she couldn't wait up for you, so I took the liberty of asking for her mailing address. I thought you might like to send her a letter or two. She *is* a doll, isn't she?"

Oh, yeah. A nearly nameless, nymphomaniacal one with commitment issues worse than mine. Just who I wanted to be pen pals with.

"Now, I had it written down in here somewhere..." Mrs. Willow shuffled back into her apartment and ducked around behind the door, muttering to herself the whole time. "Over...no. Not here either. Oh, your poor old mother'd lose her head if it weren't attached to her--ah! Here it is!"

I waited another twenty seconds before I saw Mrs. Willow scoot back into sight, a crumpled piece of notepaper clutched in her teeth. "Now don't you lose that, my little pup," she warned. Yeah, that was her thing. Dogwood was her "little pup". I guess I'd probably have turned into a jerk too with a nickname like that.

I took the paper out of courtesy and gave it a quick glance on its way into my bag. I had a feeling the address probably wasn't going to pan out, considering the city's name was spelled wrong and the zip code had six digits. Plus I was pretty sure I didn't really want to go steady with anypony who lived on "1234 Jerkoff Lane".

"Appreciate it," I said with a grin I've gotten damn good at faking over the last couple years. "But I kinda have to go to work now, so..."

"Well, don't let me hold you up, then," Mrs. Willow crooned. "Have a good day, sweetie!"

A normal, self-respecting stallion would've had the decency to cringe at that point. In my case, it wasn't even close to the worst thing to happen that morning. Perspective is a wonderful thing.

I made it outside without any more interruptions, which left me plenty of time to start thinking about what I was going to do now, with a few seconds left over for me to kick myself over forgetting to mooch a sandwich out of my surrogate mother. Making lists usually helped me get my head screwed on straight, so I decided to try that. First thing: go to the office...actually, scratch that. First thing: get food. Second thing: go to the office. Third thing...

Move out and find a new place before sundown, so I didn't have to deal with thing number four: find a carriage station to sleep under and a box of trash bags to serve as a dresser. Okay, so the list thing wasn't working as well as I'd hoped.

I went outside with my eyes closed, partially because it helped get my mind off my to-do list, but mostly because walking out into the sunshine with a hangover is about the same as tripping face-first into a bed of nails. Luckily, I knew the street well enough that I could make it at least two blocks without cracking them open once. Unluckily, my brain decided to use that time to start considering life options, none of which involved

supermodels or a mansion in Canterlot. Or three square meals a day, come to think of it.

I don't really remember when my outlook on life got so negative. I'm lying, of course; I do remember, but it's nice to be able to say that to ponies so they don't keep asking questions about why I'm so down in the dumps all the time. It never occurs to them that I probably have some pretty good stuff to be down in the dumps about. Like, oh, I don't know, being evicted. That probably qualifies. So does living alone, and making crap money, and being the only pony on the street who not only knows what "writ of certiorari" means but can actually spell it too. Y'know, stuff like that.

I guess I shouldn't focus so much on just the bad stuff. I guess I should probably learn to laugh at myself and be a free spirit in a locked-off world. I guess I should probably quit drinking whenever I get pissed off and be nicer to my friends and learn how to channel magic through my nosehairs. But hey, nopony's perfect. And me? I'm the freaking Sultan of Screwups. And sometimes, the best I can do is just learn to live with it.

I opened my eyes right before I hit the intersection at the end of the block, just in time to see everypony within twenty feet staring at me like my head had fallen off. At first, I figured it was just a little strange to see a young, prime-of-his-life earth pony walking down a crowded sidewalk with his eyes squeezed shut. When the staring didn't let up after another two blocks, I figured probably I was full of shit.

I passed by a shop window stuffed with clothing in the "if you have to ask, don't even think about it" price range, and gave a sideways glance at my reflection as casually as I could. I didn't see anything, but the mare coming out of the store whose face crumpled into a ball as she skirted quickly around me sure did. I took another longer look, and felt a shudder run down my back.

With the whole world watching, I lifted a forehoof up behind my neck, right where a shawl might've gone. When I brought it back down, it was sticky and yellow, and smelled like death warmed over. The mare from the store let out a petite little cough and practically sprinted away.

"Limburger," I said to myself. And then I sighed. It was definitely going to be one of those days.



# Chapter 2

## In Which My Life Gets Switched and Turned Upside-Down

After sprinting back home to stick my head back under the shower again—and leaving the water on because technically I was stealing it from the supers now and I figured I might as well go full throttle on the bastards—the first stop I made was at Pony Steve's. I've known him for years, first as a customer and now as the only guy who remembers who he spent the night with after Starlight's Halloween party last year. He's the oldest of six, with a younger brother who works a donut shop in Canterlot and four sisters whose chosen occupations are a little less savory. His occupation, meanwhile, is baker and pastry artist extraordinaire, and right now that pretty much made him the good Princess Celestia Herself as far as I was concerned.

Steve's shop has giant plate glass windows on either side of the door, so the scowl on his face meant he'd seen me coming. We have an interesting relationship, Steve and I, sort of a "you scratch my back and I won't break all the bones in yours" kind of relationship. I don't come to him unless I need a favor, and he doesn't speak to me unless I remind him that his mother *doesn't* remember who he spent the night with after Starlight's Halloween party last year.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in," he announced to the thankfully empty shop before curling his nose and narrowing his eyes into a squint. "The hay'd you roll in this morning?"

"Don't ask," I muttered back. "What's fresh today?"

"Besides you?"

"Okay, what's stale today?"

Now Steve's scowl looked more like a glare. "Buzz off, Brick," he growled. "I'm done giving handouts to you. You pay your own way, just like everypony else."

Every once in a while, Steve got this funny idea in his head that he was going to start standing up for himself and stop taking orders from some lousy private investigator five years his junior and without two bits to rub

together. Apparently, it had been long enough of a while already. "Stevie, c'mon..." I started out with a tacky grin. "You can't even sell the stale stuff."

"No, Brick."

"Not even for an old friend?"

"I said no. And we're not friends."

"Old enemy, then. I'm flexible."

"Get out, Brick. Or I'm callin' the cops."

"They'd be on my side, y'know."

"*Out.*"

I let out an exaggerated sigh and shrugged. "All right," I said airily. "Suit yourself."

I turned around, waiting for Pony Steve to speak up again. He didn't disappoint. "And you know what?" he yelled out as I reached the door. "I don't even care what you tell my mother! I'm sick of all that too!"

Without turning around, I shrugged again. "No, hey, I get it," I replied. "I mean, that mare at the party probably just *looked* a lot like your cousin."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a vein in Steve's neck twitch. Bluff, consider yourself called. "Y'know, I've always wondered, though," I added before looking back one last time. "Why'd she have to look like the ugly one?"

I hit the door in a full sprint, chased out by a barrage of stale bread and a string of curses that'd make a sailor blush. After poking around to find the loaf that had landed the farthest from the gutter, I winked back at Steve through the window and trotted off to the office, my breakfast already getting soggy between my teeth.

I wasn't too worried about retribution. He'd forgive me eventually, like he always did. And if he didn't, whatever I was going to do about it wasn't going to come to mind anytime soon. I can't think when I'm hungry, and I especially can't think when I've got a headache that won't decide whether it wants to grow up into a migraine or not. I'd thought it was getting better before, but the longer I stayed out in the sunshine, the wider the crack running down the center of my skull got. As I rounded the corner and the

Brick Breaker, Inc. Manehattan office came into view, I made a silent promise to myself that I would never touch another drop of alcohol as long as I lived, so help me Celestia and Luna and all their various nephews and cousins. It's always good to laugh at yourself, I say.

I was almost to the door when it occurred to me: I needed my key to get into my office. My key was in my bag, and my mouth was full of breakfast. This was a problem. I stared at the door for a good minute or so with an eyebrow cocked, half my brain judging whether I could balance the key between my forelegs without losing my bread loaf, and the other half trying to keep myself from falling over. My headache wasn't making either task very easy. Eventually, I got sick of thinking and starting doing, which here involved reaching over my shoulder with a forehoof to try to knock my bag off my shoulder and onto the ground, which here involved me forgetting that the damn thing was strapped to my *other* shoulder, which thus involved me falling on my ass and cracking my head on the door I was intending to unlock.

Which then resulted in said door swinging wide open because I'd forgotten to lock it the night before. The bread in my mouth muffled most of what I had to say about that.

Getting back up onto my hooves seemed like too much to bother with by then, so I got a good grip on what remained of my bread loaf and belly crawled the rest into my office, kicking the door close mostly on purpose on the way in. Thankfully, there wasn't too much furniture to dodge around; beside the ancient pinewood desk in the center of the room, the only other objects in my office were a couple of filing cabinets set up against the back wall and a faded brown steamer trunk sitting to the right of my desk. I'd remembered to lock that, at least. Then again, the ghostly white sheen of dust garnishing the top was kind of a dead giveaway that I hadn't *unlocked* it in months.

*Mental note: reconsider plan to train sewer rats as janitors.*

I made it over to my desk in a decent amount of time, spitting out the bread loaf on its mostly bare top as I used it to pull myself back onto my hooves. The well-worn wood gave an emphatic creak and threatened to fall apart into tiny little melodramatic pieces if I leaned on it just one more time, but as usual it didn't go through with it. I gave it a smack for good measure, then leaned back and sat down hard on the skinny brown cushion behind it. Brick Breaker was in the building. Time to go to work.

Thirty seconds passed, and the inspiration to work didn't show up. Another half a minute and a few more bites of bread didn't help much either. Being a P.I. was like that a lot. Sometimes, the drive just wasn't there. Of course, it usually helped to actually have interesting cases to do work on. All I had right now was a lonely and shockingly deranged housewife who wanted me to figure out where her husband ran off to--for his sake, I hoped it was far away from her--and a high-stakes mission to hunt down a rogue skateboard, bequeathed upon me by a green-furred little unicorn colt who wouldn't give me back my saddlebag until I agreed to take his case. There's a certain glamour that goes with this job, and I'm pretty sure I was in the little colt's room when they were handing out samples.

I'm not really sure why I still do it to begin with; the work is sparse, I'm lucky if the money even exists, and there are a thousand other things I could probably be doing better. So far, the only good reasons I can come up with are that I make my own hours and I don't necessarily have to wear clothes to work. And having a big brass nameplate sitting right up front on my desk that reads "Brick Breaker, P.I." is pretty awesome too. It'd be more awesome if anypony besides me ever saw it, but that's what I got for skimping on the office. A word to the wise: if they say in the advertisement that the property is "secluded", run like the wind.

A lot of ponies who think they're funny ask me how a pony with a magnifying glass stamped on his flank gets a name like Brick Breaker. Sometimes I make up a story to spice things up, but mostly I just tell them the truth. My father wanted a strapping young son who would follow in his hoofsteps into the construction business like my three brothers before me, and my mother wanted a daughter. Between my career choice and the fact that you couldn't pay me to go shopping for anything more complicated than toothpaste, I managed to disappoint both of them. My three older brothers all worked at Dad's lumber plant, and I went to college. Kind of galling to think that they all make more than I do now.

I tried to get my mind on more pleasant things by eating the last of my bread loaf, but even that went down sour. Last night had been catching up with me all morning, and now it had officially passed me by. My head was throbbing, my stomach was still rumbling despite the peace offering from Pony Steve, and all I had to show for my life was a twelve-by-fifteen foot office sandwiched between a duplex and a dry cleaners, and a manila folder on the desk in front of me dedicated to a stallion on the lam who'd

known better than to take orders from his psychotic wife. Guess that made me the sap who hadn't, then. Story of my freaking life.

Self-pity can be a great time-waster in a pinch, so I heaved out a heavy sigh and flipped the folder open. I'd pretty much memorized what little there was inside: a couple pages on old fillyfriends, half a sheet of notes on what a slimeball he was, one doodle of myself saving a beautiful mare from a band of muscle-bound minotaurs, and a single glossy photo of a square-jawed, sour-looking stallion with a short brown mane and what looked like an even shorter temper. I'd penciled in a single word in the white margin at the bottom: "Dino". And that was it. A name, a face, and a two-hundred-bit bonus riding on whether I could find him before his wife did. But the eternal gift of being a private investigator is that you can always imagine there's something you missed the first hundred go-arounds, some little inkling of a detail that completes the metaphorical puzzle and blows away all the metaphorical fog with a metaphorical industrial fan. It'd happened to me once or twice before, and that was enough to keep me believing a third stroke of genius was just around the corner. Somepony once told me that doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results was the definition of insanity. I'm pretty sure that pony has never done detective work.

I stared at my notes until my eyes glazed over, but nothing new stuck out. Depending on who you believed, the guy was either an average pony with a thing for lemon drops, or a coldhearted fillyfiddler who left his dear, devoted old wife for some bimbo in the boondocks and oughta be strung up from the center of the Coltlyn Bridge, bless his heart. Somehow, "yikes" just didn't quite cover it. But the sign on my desk didn't say "Brick Breaker, Marriage Counselor"; if this mare wanted me to find this sap, then I was going to find him. She was paying my rent, after...

*Oh, damn it to the moon.*

My forehead hit the folder with a heavy thunk, and stayed there. I think I groaned for a bit, but by then I could barely even work up the strength to listen long enough to tell. Mostly, all I could do was watch the word "eviction" float back and forth in the darkness behind my eyelids, and wonder distantly why this particular sucker punch to the gonads stung so much worse than all the others. I guess I just thought I'd finally found a place I could settle down for a while. I'd been living in that little box for almost two years now. I'd filled in a few of the holes in the walls, brought

some new furniture, almost gotten used to the neighbors...it was a manurehole, sure, but it was *my* manurehole. And now, in a few days' time, it would be someone else's manurehole. I was definitely groaning now.

Different ponies have different ways of coping with stress. The practical ones just swallow hard and deal with it, and I suppose the more creative ones draw or write or make macaroni art or something to get it out of their system. As for myself, I talk to Leo. He's a snow-white pegasus with a golden-orange mane, and he's not really a voice inside my head, per se; everything he says is just what I tell him to say. But it makes me feel a little more mentally balanced if I pretend it's not just me sitting in a dark room talking to myself for hours on end. Hence, I have Leo.

"What am I supposed to do?" I moaned out to the dark room that I hoped I wouldn't be occupying for hours on end. In my head, Leo just shrugged. "Oh, you're a big freaking help."

"Well, what am I supposed to say?" Leo replied in his scratchy and slightly high-pitched voice. "It's gonna be better in the morning?"

"That'd be nice of you."

This time, Leo just laughed. "Not a chance, partner," he said. "I'm just as screwed as you are."

That's the trouble with Leo not being just a voice inside my head. Usually, his outlook on the world isn't much different from mine. "Okay, think positively," he continued a second later. "I mean, you still got this place, right? You could sleep here."

I shook my head, and the contents of the folder trapped beneath my brow scattered all over the desk. "Kinda unprofessional to do that, I think," I argued back.

"Brick, you're drooling all over your single source of income. Let's be realistic here."

And that's another thing: sometimes, he just goes and pisses me off. "I'm sorry, how the hell are you helping?" I grunted, lifting my head halfway off the desk before remembering there wasn't anypony in front of me to glare at. Despite that fact, I imagined Leo putting on a confused face.

"Am I supposed to be helping?" he asked.

“No, just stand there and look cute. That’ll fix everything.”

“Brick, I’m a figment of your imagination. I can’t *stand* anywhere.”

“I know that!”

“Boy, you are seriously messed up today, aren’t you?”

“Stars above, just shut up already...”

I paused in mid-shout, then finally looked up to stare bleakly at the single bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. “You’re arguing with yourself, Brick,” I muttered as my head descended back down onto the desk again. “You’re arguing with yourself again.”

“And you’re losing,” Leo added matter-of-factly.

I let out my deepest sigh of the morning, and Dino’s picture fluttered to the floor. I was in the middle of shifting myself over to pick it up when a gentle rapping reached my ears. Good. Now I was actually hearing Leo run into things. Maybe I was crazy after all. I was still wondering whether room and board came free at insane asylums when the rapping rang out again. Only this time, it sounded more like knocking.

Knocking. Knocking on wood. Someone was knocking on the door to the office. The door to my office.

Celestia banish me to Neptune. I had a customer.

I swept all my notes on Dino haphazardly back into their folder and stuffed the whole thing into one of the filing cabinets, trying to shake off what was left of my hangover in the process and mostly just giving myself whiplash. Once that was done, I tossed a dog-eared notepad and a pencil out onto the desk where the folder had been, licked a forehoof and swept it back over my mane, wished briefly that I had some kind of detective hat to wear in situations like this, and faced the door.

“It’s open!” I called out, my heart pounding almost as much as my temple.

A second or two later, the door swung inwards about a foot, and a peach-furred mare with forest green eyes peered around the side. “I-I’m sorry,” she stammered. “Is this a bad time? I heard shouting...”

I bit my lip hard and tried to make it look like a smile. “No, you’re...you’re fine,” I answered. “Uh...please, come in.”

The mare nodded, then nudged the door the rest of the way open and walked in. The instant she walked in, my whole chest went numb. The delicately braided green mane that perfectly matched her eyes, the impeccably trimmed fetlocks, the glimmering white pearls strung around her neck...this wasn’t just a customer, this was a *rich* one. Probably part of the Orange clan that ran things uptown, if her coat was any clue. As subtly as I could, I tried to crane my neck around to check the mark on her flank, but her ruffled gray dress went all the way back to her tail.

“You’re a...an investigator, aren’t you?” the mare asked as I snapped back to attention.

“Well, that’s what it says on the door,” I chuckled back. The mare wasn’t laughing. “Yes, I’m a private investigator. I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name?”

“Oh, I’m terribly...please, call me Valencia.”

Orange family member confirmed. Initiating heart attack sequence. “And I see you’re...Brick Breaker?” she asked a moment later. I pushed my jaw back up with a forehoof and nodded.

“So, um...” I said with only a bit of stammering. “What can I help you with?”

“It’s...”

For the first time, I noticed how patently not rich Valencia looked at the moment. Her mane weave had stray hairs poking out all over the place, and her eyes were rimmed red and underscored by dark circles the size of teabags. Not to mention, that dress hardly looked like the kind an upper class pony like herself would want to show off around town. And of course, there was the nagging thought in my back of my mind that something majorly weird had to be going on if she was desperate enough to risk a trip through this neighborhood just to see me.

“I just don’t know where else to go,” she eventually croaked. For a long moment, she just stood there and sniffled a bit, while I sat there and wondered whether I was supposed to be doing anything. Comforting



obscenely rich mares having breakdowns in the middle of my office wasn't really in my repertoire of skills, as far as I knew.

"Ma'am?" I said tentatively as Valencia blew her nose with a lacy orange handkerchief.

"Oh, excuse me," she rushed to say back, stuffing the handkerchief deftly back in her saddlebag in the same instant. "...gracious, I'm a mess. I suppose you're wondering why I'm here?"

"Just a bit, yeah," I replied before I could stop myself. Valencia had a lot of self-control, though, or else she was just beyond caring by now. To be honest, I was kind of hoping it was the former.

"Well, to put it simply," she sighed. "I need your help. I need you...to find somepony. Isn't that what you do?"

I tried to keep my sigh of relief as quiet as possible. *That*, at least, I could probably handle. "That's what I do," I asserted as I leaned forward and pulled my notepad into mouth's reach. Usually, the procedure from here was to first make sure the client had the bits to make the job worthwhile, but I figured the company I was keeping now made that kind of a no-brainer. Still, it couldn't hurt to ask. "Well, first off, we're going to have to talk about fees," I began. My intention was to play things slow and see how much I could work this mare up to--because hey, I had to make a living somehow--but as it turned out I hardly had to say anything at all.

"That won't be a problem," she interrupted in mid-buildup.

To my credit, I got myself back on track fast. "Well, actually, it kind of is..."

"What I mean is, there's no need to negotiate a fee," she added a moment later, cutting me off again. "I've already taken care of that."

"You took care of...run that by me again?"

Instead of answering me directly, Valencia craned her neck back to reach into a small saddlebag tucked away inside her dress. When she straightened up again, she was holding an unsealed white envelope delicately in her teeth, which she then dropped onto my desk for me to examine. After tossing a slightly confused glance in the mare's direction, I slid the flap back on the envelope and unfolded the tri-folded sheet of paper inside. It wasn't cash or a check; it was a bank statement. I read one line,

then the next, and then all the air went out of the room only to reappear a second later inside my stomach.

“That’s...” I tried to swallow, and got stuck fast halfway through the motion. “That’s...”

“Thirty thousand initially, and another seventy thousand once you’ve done what I ask,” Valencia nodded. I would’ve said something back, except my brain was still on lockdown and my tongue was approximately the size of the Goodsteel blimp. “I do hope that’s enough,” Valencia finished a bit unsurely.

“That’s...yeah, that’s fine,” I mumbled halfheartedly. Yeah, it was fine. It was more than *fine*. For that kind of money, I’d kidnap the Princess using nothing but a pair of nose hair trimmers. I glanced up long enough to notice Valencia’s uncomfortable gaze, and with a good bit of internal resistance tore my eyes away from the envelope and yanked myself back into business mode.

“So who am I trying to find?” I asked after clearing my throat and wiping the sweat off my brow.

Valencia swallowed hard, and for a second or two I had the strangest feeling that she was trying to decide whether to even answer me.

“Clementine,” she finally said in something close to a whisper.

I grabbed my pencil in my teeth and wrote the name “Clementine” at the top of my notepad. “And was this your husband, boyfriend...”

“Daughter. She’s my daughter.”

Huh. Didn’t expect that. Didn’t expect that at all. “Your...daughter?” I said through the pencil.

Valencia nodded, her eyes shut tight. “She has dandelion yellow fur, a bright orange mane...she has her father’s nose. And my eyes, just as green, just as...” She paused, and something between a sigh and a cough escaped her lips. “She turned nine three weeks ago.”

My chest was numb again. Same feeling, completely different reason. The next question I asked was automatic, already on my lips almost before it reached my brain. “Her cutie mark...”

Valencia shook her head again. She was crying again. "Too young," she whispered. "She didn't...*doesn't*. She doesn't have...oh, my little..."

*It's not the same. It's something else. There's some other reason. There's gotta be some other reason...*

"Did she run away?" I asked quietly.

Valencia sucked in a shuddering breath, and looked at me with desolate eyes. And shook her head. "She was foalnapped," she said. "She's been gone for two days."

Of all the days to be hung over. Of all the days to finally get this case. Of all the days I had to start thinking about why I became a P.I. in the first place. It had to be today. It had to be right freaking now. The pencil dropped from my mouth, bounced off the notepad, and rolled all the way to the edge of the desk, where it fell to the floor with a gentle clatter that nearly knocked me off my seat.

"Ma'am..." I murmured. "I...I'm sorry. But I don't think..." Another sigh, and this one came with barbs that stuck fast in the back of my throat. "I can't help you."

"No, *please!*" Valencia shouted. Pleaded, was more like it. And there was no pain or sorrow corrupting those peaceful green eyes now. Just desperation. As if I really was her last hope to get her daughter back.

Funny. I remember when I *wanted* to be somepony's hero like that.

"Look, this doesn't have anything to do with you..." I started to say before Valencia cut me off.

"No, you don't understand," she gushed, her throat bobbing up and down with every word. "You're the only...I don't know where else to turn. The pony who took her, he's not like other foalnappers. He's intelligent. The police won't be able to find him. They won't look in the right places."

Oh, brilliant. Not only was I for some reason her first and only choice for the job, but she wouldn't even tell me the real reason she wanted me to do it. I'd be a fool to walk into this, for so many reasons.

"I need somepony outside the normal circles. Somepony who's more...unorthodox, if you will. Somepony who I know will do whatever it takes to find my daughter and bring her back to me."

“And what makes you think I’m that pony?” I shot back without looking at her. “Cause I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but this...” I gestured irreverently at my workspace. “This isn’t really what the best in the biz get to work with.”

“I don’t want the best,” she replied firmly. “I want you.”

“Why?” I repeated.

Again, I got the strangest feeling that Valencia didn’t want to answer me. Unfortunately, this time it was only a few blissful seconds before I found out why. “Because my husband’s brother is an associate editor for the Daily,” she said. “Because I remember when you were on the front page. And because I remember why you were there.”

*Lord Poseidon in heaven.*

“Please,” she begged. “You of all ponies must understand.”

Now it was my turn to have my eyes shut tight. “I do understand,” I muttered back. *And that’s exactly why I don’t want anything to do with this.*

“So you’ll do it?”

Well, then. Decision time, Brick. Are you going to help this frantic, hopeless mare, or are you going to save yourself while you still can? Noble sacrifice, or self-preservation? Think carefully, Brick, because whatever choice you make, you’re going to hate yourself for it regardless. Stars above, don’t you just *love* having options like that?

I mean, I wasn’t a cop. I was a private investigator. *Private*. I could easily just say no to this, just shove that bank statement back into that envelope and hand it over and say, “No thanks, I’ll pass”. Every fiber of my being was screaming at me to do just that. Every fiber of my being knew that I was exactly the wrong pony for *this* case, for *this* entire goddamned job. That if I could barely even bring myself to think about going after a foalnapper, then I couldn’t possibly expect to do anything but waste this mare’s time. And yet my lips stayed closed, and my teeth stayed clamped together like I’d brushed them over with Gorgon Glue. And my mind kept picturing a cold, hungry, dandelion-yellow filly locked in a basement somewhere, orange mane coated with grime and eyes burning with salt and fear. And an outstretched hoof reaching towards her. Lifting her up. Wrapping around her neck. Squeezing.

In the end, you might say it was my conscience that got the best of me. Not the money or the fame or the fact that I knew I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't take this case; no, you'd think, I just knew deep down in my soul of souls that it was simply the right thing to do. I was scared, I was afraid, I was downright petrified, but I saddled up anyway. My mind said no, but my heart said yes. All that good stuff that sounds great in a radio play, and is a little harder to come by when there's no script and no director and no unspoken promise that everypony will go home happy. When all you have to go on is your own mind telling you that you can't do it, and some other part of you telling you that there's no way you can't. You call it a conscience; I call it being a coward. Whatever it was, it got Valencia the answer she wanted to hear. And I suppose in the end, that's all that really matters.

"Has the foalnapper asked for a ransom yet?" I asked, figuring Valencia was smart enough to get what that implied about my decision. She was.

"No, he hasn't," she said with visible relief. "Not yet, at least."

I wrote that down on my notepad and put a big question mark at the end of the line. "How do you know your daughter was foalnapped, then?"

"Because she disappeared on the way home from school. Her friends...said they saw her talking to a strange pony on Halter Street just after class ended. It's only a block away from our home."

"And this was two days ago, you said?"

"Yes. Mid-afternoon, I suppose."

Two days ago. Two days ago was the Autumnal Equinox, one of the biggest holidays in all of Equestria. "Interesting day to commit a felony in broad daylight," I thought out loud.

"I hardly think that's at all relevant," Valencia answered with a definite edge to her voice.

"You'd be surprised," I muttered before backing off a bit. "And did these, uh...friends of hers see what this strange pony looked like?"

"Well, he looked...strange."

"Yeah, we kind of established that. Anything else?"

“They didn’t know. Her friends, I mean. They told me they didn’t get a good look at him.”

“Who were these friends, again?”

“I don’t think I’m at liberty to divulge that. This has been a...well, as I’m sure you can imagine, they’re very upset about this. You’d have to speak with their parents first if you want to question them. I can give you their addresses if you need them.”

“Sure,” I said, but without really meaning it. I hardly even glanced at the piece of paper Valencia took out of her saddlebag and scribbled on for a moment with a dainty black pen that had a cushioned guard for her teeth built right into the grip. Mostly because the single glance I did give it was long enough for me to see that those addresses would take me straight into the heart of Tuxedo Town. There were many things I’d do to make a quick bit; waltzing through the poshest neighborhoods in Manehattan to go interrogate a couple of grade-school aged foals wasn’t on the list just yet. The last time I questioned a kid, he started crying in the middle of a ice cream parlor and I spent twenty minutes trying to convince his parents that I just wanted to know where the bathroom was. Add a friend’s disappearance and a weekly allowance bigger than my retirement fund, and you had a perfect recipe for a whole different level of stuff I *really* didn’t want to deal with.

“I have a picture. Of Clementine,” Valencia said, sensing that the prolonged silence meant I’d run out of questions. I nodded in reply, and watched as Valencia reached into her bag one last time and pulled out a rectangular photo that looked like it had been pulled out of a picture frame. I stared down at where she had dropped it on top of my notepad, and a fiery-maned, gap-toothed earth filly stared back with piercing green eyes that didn’t glow like stars so much as twinkled like emeralds. It was the first time I’d seen the pony I was supposed to go find. It was about the fourth time my stomach had turned over at the very thought of it.

“All right,” I murmured. “I’ll check around Halter today, see if there’s anypony over there who saw anything. You want me to write you if I find something?”

“Don’t write. If you find anything, come tell me directly. Here, I’ll leave you my husband’s card. It has our address on it.” *Fantastic*, I thought.

*More traipsing around Fancy Flanks Acres.* “And if there’s anything else you need-”

“Just drop on by,” I finished. “Copy that.”

Valencia nodded, and pulled her lips tight. I don’t think she really knew what to do now, so after a minute or two she just nodded again and turned to leave. But not before looking back at me and saying exactly what I knew she would say at one point or another. “Please, find my daughter. Please.”

I tried to put on a smile, but lying to other people is a hell of a lot easier than lying to yourself. “I’ll do the best I can,” I said back honestly, and she seemed to take that as good enough. With a polite bow and a wayward cough, my first customer of the day showed herself out. And I sat motionless behind my desk, wondering what exactly I’d just gotten myself into.

I knew one thing: this case was big. Bigger than any I’d ever had before, and probably would ever have afterwards. A hundred thousand bits was serious bank to even a pony like Valencia, and to have thirty percent of it sitting in an envelope right there on the edge of my desk was unreal. I didn’t even have *dreams* this crazy. To be honest, I wasn’t entirely sure I wasn’t dreaming right now. My head certainly felt light enough to make it a possibility.

A few minutes after my front door swung closed again, I reached out with my forehooves and pulled the bank statement out of the envelope to read it again. According to that, the Orange Family had opened up a bank account in my name at Equestrian First National, and the first portion of my fee had already been deposited and was available for withdrawal any time I wanted it. Thirty thousand bits in my own private vault, before I’d even known about the case. And if I actually found Clementine, another seventy grand would trickle on down straight into my saddlebag. It seemed too good to be true, and in my experience that meant it probably was. There was something else going on here, and I couldn’t begin to think of what it could be. But the bits were real. Valencia’s tears were real. And that meant this case was real. Where the cash came from didn’t matter; I was being paid to be an investigator. So, I would investigate. I would catch the foalnapper, I would save the foal, and I would take the money and run, baby. All in a day’s work for Mr. Hotshot Private Investigator.

It sounded so simple when I put it like that, didn't it? Like something easy. Like something that didn't mean anything beyond a crime and a criminal and a good pony like me out to bring him to justice. Like something I knew I could do.

I shoved the envelope aside and looked at Clementine's photo again. "Can I do it, Leo?" I whispered. "Can I do it right this time?"

There's one other reason I know Leo isn't just some voice in my head, and that reason is that he always answers me when I talk to him. When I call, he comes. It's one of the few things I can count on always being true: death, taxes, and Leo's always one word away. And right now, more than ever before, I needed an answer from Leo. Not anypony else. Just him. So I asked him the question that had been digging through my head ever since I found out what those thirty thousand bits were for, and waited for Leo to reply.

And in ten minutes, he never did. For the first time since he'd first taken up residence in my brain, Leo had nothing to say.

There's something to be said for spending your whole life carting lumber. At least my brothers didn't have to deal with crap like this.



# Chapter 3

## In Which the Term “Economic Depression” Takes On a New Meaning

I’m pretty sure I’ve mentioned this before, but it bears repeating: being a private investigator isn’t really as exciting as it’s cracked up to be. I guess ponies look at us like they do knights and spies and black-bearded pirate captains: as dangerous, devil-may-care mavericks, riding by the hairs of their tails and living life on the edge. I’ve never really figured out whether I’m the exception or the rule when it comes to PIs, but regardless it’s safe to say that I’m falling down on the job as far as keeping up that image is concerned. “Devil-may-care”, I’ve got covered; “dangerous”, not so much.

Mostly, what I spend my days doing is thinking. Usually, it’s about important things, like what I’m going to have for dinner or where I left my good umbrella or why the hell Poseidon decided to give the equine race nice, long, luxurious backs and little stubby hooves that were too short to scratch them where they itched. Occasionally, I thought about my cases, the things I was presumably paid to think really, really hard about. Very rarely did I ever think about why I even took a case at all. I guess today was just one of *those* days too, though, because I was sure as salt thinking about that now.

I suppose “thinking” wasn’t the most appropriate term for what I was doing. “Thinking” usually implied progress; “thinking” meant that I was deeply considering every aspect of this new development in my life and finding insightful solutions to practical problems, or whatever it was the Home Ec teacher in junior high had told us about decision-making. A slightly better word was “reflecting”; the ideal one was “vegetating”. Just sort of sitting there, staring off into space, slowly coming around to realizing that I’d just taken on a job where a little filly’s life hung in the balance. A relatively simple concept, sure, but it felt thick as molasses and about as heavy while I was letting it trickle through my brain.

It’s funny how sometimes your brain is smarter than you are. It wasn’t my brain that got me into this situation; my brain had been that little voice in the back of my mind that had threatened to castrate me with a

diamond-spiked mace if I even thought about saying yes to this case. I guess that's because the brain doesn't feel guilt, or sympathy, or fear.

That's all the heart and the stomach and, on a really bad day, the bowels. What the brain does feel, though, is the sensation of having absolutely no clue what to do next. My brain has something of a talent for that, if you want to know the truth.

Gradually, the urge to get up and do *something* began to solidify in my stomach as a hot, tingly ball of what felt a lot like lead. I tend to get impulsive when I'm confused, drunk, or otherwise mentally incapacitated, so about fifteen minutes after Valencia left, I swung my forehooves off my desk and trotted to the door, breaking my stride only to grab the envelope she had left behind. At least I had a couple wits still bouncing around someplace upstairs. And if all that covered was the knowledge that money equaled food and sleep and cold, frosty drinks that made all the bad, scary things go away between four and six P.M., I could live with that.

I nosed the door open and walked face-first into a blast of icy September wind, which helped to clear my head more than I would've expected. The shock was only enough to buy me a few seconds of coherence, but that was enough time for me to remember a little white piece of paper with big red letters on it tacked to the door of my apartment.

I'd been evicted not even two hours ago because I'd barely been bringing in enough cash to keep myself from starving, let alone to keep the landlord happy. But as I shut my eyes against the breeze and flattered my ears against my skull, I remembered something else: as of twenty minutes ago, I had another little piece of paper in my saddlebag, one worth about ten times what I usually made in a month. Enough to pay my rent for the next twenty months. Probably enough to just buy the whole apartment straight up. I'm not entirely sure about this, but in most circles I believe that's what they call a godsend. And all I had to do to earn it was find one little foal.

Actually, if you thought about it, I didn't even have to do that. Another thing worth saying twice: perspective is a wonderful thing.

It was like I hadn't quite woken up yet that morning, and now I'd finally managed to get my hooves on a double shot of espresso. I had my life back under control again, and a whole plan for the day began to shape up as I started walking again. Step One: find a bank. Step Two: get money out of said bank. Step Three: spend said money, which would then lead into Step Four: sleep in my own bed that night. Forget what the old

wives said; I was about to buy me some freaking happiness. And it felt great.

I pulled the bank statement back out of my bag just to look at it one more time, and this time I finally let out the stupidly wide grin I'd had to hold back while Valencia was watching. *Pay to the order of Brick Breaker.*

Beautiful words. Poetic, even. If I could carry a tune, I would've sang it: *pay to the order of Brick Breaker, pay to the order of me.* And what was that at the top of the page there? An address for the central branch of Equestrian First National Bank, that's what. An address that just so happened to be right smack in the middle of Bell Street, which just so happened to be the next street over from Halter. "Godsend" didn't even cover this anymore. I wasn't just hired for this case; I was *meant* for it. I was ready, I was able, I was probably still hung over and just a touch on the loopy side now, but right now was not the time to be worried about that. That time would come later, during the inevitable moment when the mental espresso wore out and the other horseshoe dropped. Right now, it was time to go to the bank. My grin snuck back onto my lips again, even wider and stupider than before.

"This is insane," I whispered to myself, right before I turned the corner and headed off to the heart of Manehattan with my head held high and my hooves practically buzzing with whatever it was that was jetting through down my spine and leaking out onto my face. I felt free. I felt wealthy. I felt *invincible*, baby.

That feeling lasted about ten minutes. But in retrospect, that was a pretty awesome ten minutes.

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When you're in a big city, there are a lot of things about it that any idiot can see. Ask anypony the right questions, and they'll always give you the same answers. What size are the buildings? Big. How packed are the sidewalks? Very. How many licks does it take to get to the peppermint center of a Party Pop? Who the hay wants to know?

But when you live in one for a while, especially one as big as Manehattan, you start to notice other things that the Corncob Family visiting from Hitchita probably won't pick up on. Usually, it's little things, like how the hot dog vendor on Fourth and Trotsdale likes to drop a pinch of parsley into the veggie grinder on Saturdays, or how it's not only

possible but fully expected of you to walk from one end of the city to the other without ever making eye contact with anypony. Stick around for long enough, though, and eventually the picture widens, and you see one single big thing that you can't believe no pony else ever brought up before. I had that moment a year and a half ago, after I took a wrong turn about an hour after midnight and found myself in the kind of place thieves and muggers tell their foals about to scare them into staying in bed at night, and what I realized then was this: different parts of the city say different things to you when you're walking into them.

For example, the lovely district I found myself strolling through on that eventful night a year and a half ago said, "Hello, Brick. Ponies call me the Broncs, and I call you *dinner*." Meanwhile, a more pleasant locale like Hoofington Heights is a bit more succinct: "Why, hello there, young fella! Come on in, take a load off, and mind your hooves on the new carpet, won't you, dearie?" Every part of town has its own little slice of personality it just can't wait to share with you, and most of them fall somewhere close to one of those two extremes. The neighborhood where I live, Sugarcube Hill, seems to be right in the middle as far as I can tell. It's not openly hostile at first glance, but after a while you realize that's only because it doesn't particularly care that you're there in the first place. Kind of as if it's saying, "Yes, there you are. I see you. Whoop-de-freaking- doo. Keep walking, bub." Everypony has their own agenda, and that suits them all just fine. Suits me fine, too. A lot of things are simpler when you're just a face in the background, and investigating is definitely one of them.

The district I was walking into now, though, was unlike any other I'd ever passed through. It didn't just say something; it had a voice all its own, one that commanded attention and made damn sure you followed orders when it did. It was the Manehattan financial district, and every cobblestone and every brick in it said quite distinctly, "I am bigger than you, I am richer than you, and I am better than you. And if you'd care to still have your head attached to your shoulders come the morning tomorrow, you'd do well not to forget it, *sir*." I'd never really spent any time in this area before, and with good reason: I was the only pony in sight who wasn't practically glowing with jewelry.

Although the ponies in this part of town loved to coat every square inch of fur they had with all kinds of trinkets and baubles, the gemstones themselves weren't really a symbol of wealth anymore. Today, they were about as common as a good cup of coffee. Take back the clock a hundred

years or so, though, and a single diamond could buy you a mansion big enough to house a whole polo team. Ponies made and lost their fortunes on who could find the most rubies and sapphires, and who would dare to search for them where nopony had ever searched before. And eventually, what that led to was one unicorn by the name of Rocky Feller searching a bit too far and stumbling across a spell that could make gemstones grow like weeds straight out of solid rock. Once he woke up the next morning to find a cluster of opals sprouting in his kitchen and realized the disgusting amount of moola he could squeeze out of it, he turned the accidental discovery into a countrywide gemstone empire, and for about six months he was the richest pony Equestria had ever seen.

Then one lovely fall day, Rocky's in-laws got a little too generous with the birthday champagne, and just like that his secret was out. The spell was duplicated, gemstones started cropping up everywhere, and everything pretty much went to shit in a saddlebag. The economy died a magnificent fiery death and took its benefactors down with it, Rocky skipped town in a yacht headed for Bearmuda, and everypony everywhere panicked: anarchy in the streets, brawls in the alleyways, dogs and cats living together, the whole nine yards. They tried to shut down the liquor stores for about three days, and Canterlot nearly burned to the ground.

After a week of frantic negotiations and about ten minutes after she was nearly brained by an emerald-studded horseshoe, Celestia ceased with the pedantics and created the Equestrian bit that we all use today. The stars only know how she did it. The popular story is that she spit out some kind of time-warping spell and set up the whole system while the entire nation was frozen in mid-riot. The official story from Celestia was that those sorts of rumors were exactly what got us in this situation in the first place, and that fiddling with the fabric of space and time was never a good idea and she would never condone it, and for the record she doesn't just *spit out* the spells that fix all the thousands of things you little lunatics have to blow up into big, gigantic-

Apparently, the press conference ended abruptly at that point after Celestia visibly bit her tongue and then teleported out of the room. Being a monarch is stressful sometimes, I guess.

In any case, things got back to normal surprisingly quickly after that. The old elite fell out of favor and spread out across the countryside to try—and mostly fail—to rebuild, and the savvy ponies who were quick enough to

get in on the ground floor of the new financial market stepped right into the gilded horseshoes they left behind. After twenty years, the capital of Equestria might as well have been Manehattan for all the banks and treasuries centered there, and for all the absolutely filthy rich banking families that called it home. Eighty years later, the picture was mostly the same, save for the addition of one crimson-haired, slightly disheveled earth pony without so much as a garnet to his name, who stuck out much in the same way a pony with an extra head would. Oddly enough, the filthy rich banking families of Manehattan aren't known for their cordiality. After spending a few minutes walking among them with their eyes all locked on my flank the whole way, I realized that they weren't very good with subtlety either. By the time I finally reached Equestrian First National, I'm pretty sure there wasn't a single pony left in Rocky Feller Plaza who hadn't silently judged me for everything under the sun.

I stood outside the front steps of the bank and craned my neck up to where the EFN corporate headquarters tapered off somewhere around Saturn. The front half of the bank was a relic from an older time: a short flight of steps led up to a row of polished granite columns, each one as thick around as a redwood and standing twenty feet tall under a regal domed roof. It was an image that didn't suggest "bank" so much as define it; ponies put their whole lives into this place, and it was more than happy to keep an eye out for them. Conversely, the back half was the new generation's assurance that accessibility just wasn't gonna cut it anymore. Not even ten feet behind the rotunda in the front rose sixty stories of glass, steel, and the very best in modern magical engineering. At least, I liked to think that was what made it look like the building leaned out over you when you stood right under it. Sometimes, life's a lot simpler when you can just blame an evil sorcerer or something for all the things that bother you. Or, in this case, just make you wish you'd just stayed in bed this morning.

"Come on, Brick," I hissed at myself without looking down. "It's just a building. It's just a bank."

Right. Just a bank. When was the last time I'd even been *in* a bank? Probably around the time I took two grand off a filthy rich loan shark in a horseshoes game eight months ago, when it took me twenty minutes to put the money away and about two weeks to burn it all away. And that hadn't been a bank so much as a cardboard box shoved in a hole in the drywall behind my bed. I'm not really all that good with finances, to be honest.

*Yeah. Like that's really the only thing I'm worried about right now.*

I blinked hard, then turned my gaze back down towards the main entrance of the bank. Okay, deep breath, Brick. You have money here. You have power here. You belong here. No, you moron, of course you don't. But they don't know that, do they? And they don't need to. So chin up, neck straight, chest out, and keep it cool. Money, power, control. Swagger. You have *swagger*, Brick.

*Lord Poseidon in Heaven*, I thought for the second time that day. And then I set my jaw, sucked in a deep breath, and marched up the steps and into the bank.

I hardly even looked around once I got inside, though I could feel the eyes of the other ponies in the foyer on me as much as I could feel every molecule of air around me slamming into my skin at something close to terminal velocity. My own eyes, meanwhile, stayed zeroed in on the row of windows lining the back wall. That was my destination; everything else was just scenery. Everything else was just things that weren't as important as me, things that weren't as important as Brick Breaker, the new big shot in this town.

*Keep walking. Don't look around. Don't slow down. Swagger. Swagger swagger swagger swagger horseapplesonacrapsandwich swagger.*

I was halfway across the foyer now, a strange gravelly noise ringing in my ears. *Keep walking.* It disappeared for a moment, then came again ten paces later. *You got this.* This time, it was even louder than before. *Piece'a cake.* What the hell even *was* that noise? Gears gearing? Someone clearing their throat? *No, don't think about it. Ignore it. You're almost there. Almo-*

"Sir!"

"*What?*" I nearly screamed as I spun around to face the scowling brown unicorn behind me, who was snappily dressed in a suit coat and tie and whose echoing shout had been about an octave short of putting me in traction. Add to the list of things I wasn't good at: management of stress.

"Exactly *where* do you think you're going?" he asked in a tone that made me feel like a little colt caught stealing from the cookie jar. *Oh, no you didn't*, the lingering vestiges of my *swagger* said.

“What’s it to ya?” I almost said, right before the rest of my brain realized what it had been missing this whole time. Namely, the fact that there was a nice, neat, orderly line of ponies snaking back and forth across the left side of the room that ended up at the row of tellers and began about ten feet in front of the unicorn stallion. Now he was glaring at me too, as were a few of the ponies in line. The ponies who I’d just about skipped right on past while the impulsive part of my brain had had full control over my body.

“Well?” the unicorn said.

Still had full control over my body, actually. “I know what I’m doing,” I snapped back, self-restraint utterly abandoned in the panic of the moment. “I’m...

*Swagger.*

“I’m a preferred customer.” *Stars above, what in the holy hell are you doing?*, my self-restraint asked during the brief moment when it decided to grow a pair and show up for roll call. For lack of any better ideas, I kept talking anyway. “Yeah, I’m a frickin’ gold member over here,” I said. “So just...cool it, all right, buddy?”

I think everyone in the room was surprised when the unicorn’s eyebrows shot up. “You don’t say?” he gasped. “My apologies, good sir. If I had only known, I never would’ve spoken.”

I spent a moment or two glancing frantically around for an escape route before I fully understood that I might very well have just bullshitted my way out of this. “I...yeah,” I finally stuttered. “Yeah, I’ll...all right, then. I’ll forgive you this time, I gue-”

“I mean, think of all the special privileges a gold member receives!” the unicorn continued, sounding like a foal who’d just discovered that his mom really was the Tooth Fairy.

“Yeah, great, so I’m just gonna...”

“The rewards, the benefits, the desperate jealousy of the stallions and burning desire of the mares...”

*He’s screwing with you, Brick.*

“And of course, who could forget the best part of all...”



"You're screwing with me, aren't you?" I said.

"...the honor, no, the *privilege*, of standing in line with all us common folk and gracing us with the immeasurable gift of your presence," the unicorn finished in a deadpan, his glare back to stay this time. Somewhere behind me, a mare snickered.

"Yeah," I muttered. "All right, look, I don't know any of you and I'm in kind of a hurry..."

"Wonderful!" Freddy Flankhole exclaimed, every syllable soaked through with derision. "Then by all means, you may have the spot in front of me."

Now I really had a dilemma. Exactly half of me wanted to just mumble some apology and shuffle on over into line, and the other half wanted to spout some corny one-liner before bucking this guy straight to the moon. One would be the submissive, wimpy, rational thing to do, and the other would be freaking awesome and probably enough to get me arrested. I chewed on my lip for a second or two, then looked the unicorn straight in the eye and made my decision.

Forty-five minutes later, I was starting to wish I'd just gone ahead and went with the one that involved jail time. At least then I could've stood around waiting forever all by myself.

"Next pony, please," the teller all the way over on the left, a matronly pink earth mare with a sky-blue mane and matching spectacles perched on her nose, called out.

"After you," offered Freddy, with what he must've known was an infuriating sneer. I mouthed my thanks with a toothy grin, and fully resisted the urge to use his skull as a kickball.

"Name?" the mare behind the desk asked almost before I got all the way over to her.

"Brick Breaker," I replied, with one eye still on today's entry on my personal list of ponies I wouldn't mind banishing to Neptune for a millennium or two. Still smirking at me from his place back in line, of course.

"Account number?"

“I...just a sec.”

The teller pursed her lips, but didn't say anything as I swung my saddlebag around to my front and started digging around for Valencia's letter. The pony at the window to my left finished up as I rifled through old receipts and what looked to be either a fossilized half of a bagel or a very oddly shaped rock, and who should take his place but Sir Snobby himself, my unicorn friend I'd just spent almost an hour simmering in front of. I found the envelope with the bank statement in it just as he reached the window, and I couldn't help but watch him out of the corner of my eye as I dropped it in front of my teller.

“Birthday gift?” he chuckled.

“Gratuity,” I growled back. “Your mother's been very generous lately.” Some ponies might tell me it was wrong to take so much pleasure from seeing the unicorn grit his teeth and shoot me a harrowingly dirty look. Those ponies can stick it where Celestia's sun don't shine.

“Brick Breaker, was it?” my teller asked after scanning the bank statement I'd given her.

“It was,” I replied airily. She glanced down at the paper again and then back up at me with more than a little sarcasm, but I was suddenly in such a good mood that I hardly even noticed. As she asked me to wait for a moment and then trotted away to figure out something-or-other, I craned my head casually back and flawlessly mimicked the smirk my companion had been wearing just a moment before.

“Payment, actually,” I told him. “From a member of the Orange family. Y'know, one of the richest, most powerful families in all of Equestria? You've probably heard of them.”

After a moment, the unicorn stallion smiled back. “Indeed,” he murmured before turning to face his own teller, who had been waiting patiently for him the whole time. “Afternoon, George,” he said, pushing an envelope identical to mine under the window.

“Good afternoon, sir,” his teller replied as he peered inside only briefly, as if he already knew exactly what he'd see in it. “Another deposit?”

The unicorn's eyes flicked over to me for a moment, then back at the teller. “As a matter of fact, I'll take it now, if you don't mind,” he said. “In

cash, please.” He turned to me again as the teller’s brow shot up. I took a mint from the dispenser on the counter and ignored him.

“All of it, sir?” the teller asked hesitantly.

“Yes, thank you, George,” the unicorn replied without looking at him, a simpering smile starting to creep onto his face. I rolled my mint onto my back of my tongue and shot back a smirk on my own. *Not this time, buddy*, I told him inside my head.

The unicorn’s teller stared at the both of us for a bit, and then shrugged. “So be it,” he said crisply. “One hundred thousand bits in cash for Mr. Neighman.”

Whatever I had to say about that was lost thanks to an untimely incident involving a peppermint candy suddenly lodging itself in the back of my throat, in which I did a very good impersonation of a pony trying to cough out his small intestine in full view of the good patrons of Equestrian First National. Mr. Neighman watched the whole time without even the decency to laugh openly, but I wasn’t really focusing on him at the time. Mostly, I was occupied with wondering how in the strawberry-scented hell it was even legal to make a withdrawal that big from any kind of normal bank, and to a lesser extent with taking comfort in realizing that I’d probably pass out before I could come up with a valid reason. And then somewhere in there was the fact that I was seriously about to choke to death on a goddamn bank mint. Funny what the mind prioritizes sometimes.

After a few seconds of wheezing, hacking, and a general mishmash of noises one might expect to hear from a pregnant cat with a stomach bug, out popped the mint onto the now slightly less polished floor, no thanks at all to the virtual horde of ponies behind me who did a fantastic job standing there and watching me suffocate. I watched the mint as it skittered away and came to a stop between a sea-green mare’s pedicured front hooves, then looked up at Neighman, whose face was completely inoffensive save for the one part that started around his chin and stretched up to just above his ears. I remember that part being the one I thought would look very nice mounted on the wall over my dresser.

“Curiously strong, aren’t they?” I coughed with as much dignity as I could manage, which was kind of a hilarious concept even on days where I wasn’t saying it directly after my first ever near-death-by-hard-candy experience. Neighman pulled his lips back into a bemused look and

nodded slowly, then turned back to his teller, whose eyes were wide behind the generously stuffed manila envelope he was holding in his teeth.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” he said, his horn glowing softly as he signed his name on something and levitated the envelope out of the teller’s grasp. Before he dropped it into his chest pocket, he let it hang in the air in front of me for a bit.

“Salary,” he said. “Monthly, actually. Courtesy of Neighman Brothers Holdings. Biggest investment bank in Equestria? I’m sure you’ve heard of it.”

Yes, I had heard of it. Everypony within five hundred miles had heard of it. I had even seen it outside this bank, spelled out in glinting gold letters right under the Equestrian First National Bank sign: “Subsidiary of Neighman Brothers Inc.” And here I was, just about ready to throw down with the freaking CEO. For the first time in my life, I actually regretted choosing not to lie on the couch and starve to death.

“Good day to you,” Mr. Leighman said with one last nod before turning on his hoof and striding regally away, and this time he didn’t even bother to try to hide the grin on his face. Well, that was just fine by me. Chasing after him would’ve just shredded up the last little morsel of dignity I was imagining I still possessed somewhere, and in any case beating the ever-loving piss out of him would’ve probably just lead to me discovering that he had a double black belt in jujitsu or a bodyguard the size of the Liberty Mare or the ability to set ponies on fire with his mind. I’m pretty sure the air I was sucking down like a five-bit wine cooler hadn’t hit my brain by then, so I wasn’t ruling anything out just yet.

“What’re you lookin’ at?” I muttered in the general direction of the other customers, all of whom were quite busy looking at the flowery designs carved into the ceiling and not at me. Make that two things I was one-hundred-percent okay with. Maybe if I didn’t look at them, they’d disappear too.

“Sorry about that,” somepony sighed. I forced my head up and saw that my teller was back. “Just needed to clear up some procedural things. But in any case, everything’s ready now. Your current balance is thirty thousand bits on the nose. Would you like to make a withdrawal?”

“Why not?” I sighed back.

“Okay, then. How much would you like?”

In the distance, the sound of hooves and wheels clattering against cobblestone reverberated into the bank for just a moment. Mr. Neighman had left the building. And I was still here, staring at the biggest paycheck of my life and realizing it meant precisely jack to everyone in attendance. How much did I want? How much did I really even freaking have?

“Sir?” the teller started to say before I cut her off.

“Just drain the damn thing,” I told her. The teller gave me the kind of look that I could tell was just a more polite substitute for what she really wanted to say, but whatever she was thinking, I never heard it. Two minutes and a couple forms later, I had a manila folder just like Leighman’s, except mine only had six packs of crisp fifty one-hundred-bit bills. Y’know, instead of twenty.

“Have a nice day,” the teller said to me, and at least they paid her enough to act like she meant it. It didn’t much matter either way to me by then, though. I was already done with interpersonal communication for the day, and possibly for the next ten years or so. But nopony was going to look me in the eye and tell me that wasn’t justified, because this case had officially passed the threshold of “shit I make it a practice to deal with at some point” a long time ago, and everything that happened after that was just another nail that I’d have to pry out of its coffin someday if I ever wanted that second half of my payment. As in, the half that would make the whole experience worth about as much as a month of board meetings and dinner parties for the more well-off members of society.

As I finally escaped the aristocratic jungle inside the bank and reentered the concrete one outside, I found myself staring morosely at the crinkled corner of the envelope poking out of my saddlebag. *What the hell’s wrong with you?*, I asked myself. *You’re loaded, you moron! You’ve got thirty thousand bits strapped right to your back! The world’s your goddamn oyster, Brick!*

Yeah. It was, wasn’t it? Except my oyster was the runt of the litter. And I could get all the jobs and liquor and drunk, horny mares my loaded little heart desired, and I’d still be playing second fiddle to jerkasses like Neighman. I’d acted like an idiot in front of ponies worth a hundred times more than me. I’d followed my impulses, just like I’d been when I’d taken Valencia’s case and when I’d swiped my breakfast from Pony Steve and

when I'd spent all the money I managed to scrap together on drinking and partying because I couldn't stand to deal with the rest of my life any longer than I had to, because at the end of the day I still hated being poor. The rest of Equestria could have their hopes and dreams and wishes on rainbows; in Manehattan, you either had money or you wanted it. And I was just now realizing that I was gonna be on the wrong side of that equation for the rest of my freaking life.

Somewhere off in the distance, a old, familiar voice piped up: "Remember, Brick, money can't buy happiness."

"Shut the hell up, Leo," I growled in the back of my throat. And with that, my mind was made up. Little Miss Clementine was just going to have to wait. It was one in the afternoon, my hooves were sore and my head was splitting right down the center, and I was a regular ol' mortal pony with no place to go but anywhere he hadn't just been. I needed peace. I needed someplace quiet. I needed someplace where I felt like somepony gave at least half a crap that I existed.

Mostly, though, I needed a drink. And if that following that impulse was the only good thing that was going to come out of today, then that was just going to have to be good enough.

# Chapter 4

## In Which Murphy Earns His Degree In Law

I've always found it kind of strange how I can get a plan together in a time of crisis, execute it to perfection, even improvise a bit on the fly when I need to, and then be completely clueless once the part I planned out is finished. It's like I'm a little toy soldier that always needs winding: once the key in the back of my head stops turning, I'm as good as dead on my feet. My mother always said it was because I didn't have any initiative, because I always needed someone to tell me what to do and I never listened when they did. And that's only half-true: I didn't really ever listen to her during all of the various times she tried to steer me towards a "reputable" career—by which she meant one that involved physical labor and not being "too good for the family business"—but I could do anything I wanted to as long as I had some idea of how to get to the end of it. And then that idea ran its course and gave over to either blind impulse or nothing at all. Everything that happened today should give you a pretty good idea of how the former plan usually turns out.

This time, though, I was going for the latter option, which basically meant I spent the next hour or so after leaving the bank wandering in a general circle around it, sort of trying to look like I had somewhere important to be but mostly just avoiding accepting the fact that I was lost. I'd had some vague notion of finding a bar or someplace with similar standards for alcohol consumption, but I was used to the kind of drinking establishments that the ponies in these parts wouldn't be caught dead even looking at, let alone actually doing any drinking at. Around here, all I could see on every street was block after block of cute little clubs and lounges where business executives went to have cocktails and appletinis and fruity blue drinks with tiny red umbrellas sticking out of the top. Trying to get drunk in one of those places would probably be akin to striding into the Everfree Forest with a saddle soaked in manticore pheromones. I preferred my bars to be of the variety that couldn't be any seedier if you sowed and planted them at harvest time, so I kept walking, my throat drying out and my head fogging up more and more with every step.

Eventually, I looked up from the pavement and saw an enormous steel-girdered beast of a building casting its shadow over me. I was in front of Equestria First National again. I sighed and squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, though I didn't really have any reason to be surprised. This was the fourth time I'd passed it in the last hour. My stomach growled as I squinted up at the glinting stone columns outside, as if I needed another reminder that I was getting nowhere in a big damn hurry. The fact that my being a coward was the only thing standing between me and a three-course lunch at The Rainbow Room was just icing on the cake by this point.

My gut rumbled again a moment later, and this time it was enough to shake off the last few strands of pride still floating around inside my chest. *Mom was definitely wrong, I told myself. I've got enough ambition for ten ponies. What I lack is willpower.*

Well, so long as I had identified the problem, I could afford to indulge in it for one more day. After pairing that thought with a shrug and something akin to a grimace, I sat down on the curb and nosed open the envelope sticking out of my saddlebag so I could fish out the wad of bills nearest to the top. I was in the middle of peeling off a few notes to tuck inside the front pocket of my bag when a breathy, bemused voice spoke up behind me.

"Well, that's something I don't see every day," it said.

I turned around with five thousand bits still balanced between my forehooves, and somehow wasn't surprised at all by the pony I found myself looking at. "You mean me sitting in the gutter?" I replied.

"I mean you sitting in the gutter with money," the pony shot right back with an impish grin. "You forget to tip the getaway driver, or what?"

For a second, I tried to glare back, but my concentration broke in a heartbeat, and all I could do after that was shake my head and laugh. "Nice to see you too, Loose Leaf," I chuckled as I got my hooves under me and tossed the cash roll back into my bag.

Loose Leaf's grin grew wider, and the snort that followed was a lot louder than mine had been. "You know me," he said as he stuck out a forehoof and helped me up. "I aim to please."



"Sure," I mouthed back, even though I was still laughing too. At least one thing about this day was tilted in my favor. Loose Leaf was a skinny little runt of a unicorn with faded gray fur, a wavy mane and tail colored a solid forest green, and a nearly eternal gleam of mischief in his baby blue eyes. He was one of those ponies with a face you forgot in an instant and a personality you remembered for the rest of your life, and he was also one of those ponies who had about as many crazy ideas per day as he had hairs on his body. Once, he had spent three months building a giant scale model of a pirate ship entirely out of old notecards just to see if he could make it float. Another time, he had covered his whole apartment in carbon paper and wasted the weekend spraying paint all over it with soup ladles and a tire pump. Apparently, that was supposed to foster his newfound talent for modern art. His stunts were almost always about something like that: finding a special talent or gift he thought he might have. I guess I can't blame him for experimenting. When all you've got on your flank is a blank sheet of college-ruled paper, I can understand hoping it doesn't just mean you're good at collating tax returns.

"How the hell are ya?" I asked him once we started walking.

Loose Leaf shrugged, but his cheeky grin never faded. "Not too bad," he said. "Not too bad. You still stalking old housewives?"

"You still working for a living?" I shot back. Loose fell back a step and put his hoof over his chest.

"Straight to the heart, Brick," he moaned. "It's always straight to the heart with you, isn't it?"

"It's a gift," I answered. Loose Leaf just raised his eyebrows and smirked again.

"So you gonna tell me where you got all that?" he asked next.

I almost told him everything, but at the last second I remembered what Valencia had looked like when she had started talking about her daughter. I could trust Loose Leaf to do a lot of things, but keeping his mouth shut usually wasn't one of them. "Got lucky," I ended up saying.

"How intriguing," Loose deadpanned. "Please, go on."

"No can do, buddy."

"Come oooooon...you always told me about 'em before!"

“This one’s...” I paused for a second to search for the right word. Once again, I just went with the first thing that came to mind. “It’s different. But it’s big, though.”

Loose Leaf’s eyes slid back towards my saddlebag. “How big?”

“Thirty thousand bits big.”

Leaf’s brow shot up, and he cocked his head to the side. “I’m sorry, Brick, I must not’ve slept well last night. Sounded like you said thirty *thousand* bits?”

“And another seventy once I’m done.”

“Ho-lee...” Loose Leaf trailed off with his forehoof behind his head, then burst out laughing. “...*damnit*, Brick! Are you serious?”

“Yep.”

Leaf’s eyebrows dropped again, but the corners of his mouth didn’t move. “And you’re still not gonna tell me, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Because you’ve always been a stickler about the whole client confidentiality thing.”

“I said this one was different.”

“All right, all right...” Leaf said, though now his expression looked more like a smirk than anything else. I smacked him on the shoulder just on the off chance it was.

“So what’re you doing around here?” I asked as we reached the corner and turned left. “How’s the filing going?”

“Great,” Loose Leaf replied quickly with yet another giddy smile. “I quit last week.”

It took Loose Leaf a couple steps to notice that I had stopped. “You...you just quit?” I repeated a bit slowly, though I had every right to be confused. Loose Leaf had been a file clerk at Rein & Company for almost three years now, and hadn’t complained it even once in front of me. Leaf was impulsive, sure, but he wasn’t *that* impulsive. “What happened?”

“Nothin’ happened,” Loose Leaf said from a few paces away. “You mean, was I gonna get fired or something? No, they loved me. Boss said they all really hated to see me go.” He turned around and started walking again. “But it’s just...I just felt like *doing* something for a change. Y’know?”

“Not really,” I admitted, speeding up into a trot to catch up to Loose Leaf, who chewed on his tongue for a bit before he started to explain himself.

“Look, you know how sometimes you think back to when you were a little foal and you wanted to be a cowcolt or a firepony or a doctor or whatever, and then you realize that you’re never gonna be that pony you thought you’d be no matter how hard you try?” he said.

“Yeah,” I replied. “And that’s why Poseidon invented rum drinks.”

Leaf laughed, but it was a brief one this time. “See, that’s how everypony thinks nowadays, isn’t it? It’s how I thought too. I mean, when I was growing up, I wanted to be a magician. No, seriously. I got all the books, went to all the shows...there was actually this ‘My Little Magician’ club I joined when I was eight. I got a big robe and a hat with stars on it and everything. Looked like a dumbass too, but it was what I loved.

“And then I get detention one day and stay after class sorting papers with Miss Starlight, and the next morning *this* shows up”—he jerked his head towards his flank—“and all of a sudden everyone tells me I’m gonna be doing that for the rest of my life. And I went with it, Brick. For so long, I just went with it, because I thought I didn’t have any other choice. You know how many years of my life I spent trying to figure out whether I was good at origami or novel writing or some other stupid thing that had anything to do with paper? Way too damn many, Brick.

“So last week, I got to thinking about all that, and all of a sudden I just couldn’t stand it anymore. I quit my job, I emptied my bank account, and now...hell, I don’t even know what I’m doing now. But I think that’s kinda what I wanted from this to begin with. I think I wanted to do just one thing that I *wanted* to do, and not waste every day of every week wondering what I was *supposed* to want to do. Because that’s not what a cutie mark is, Brick. ‘Cause my special talent might be, I don’t know, sorting finance reports faster than a speeding intern, but that doesn’t define who I am. I can be anything I want to be, and all I need to get it is the guts to go for it.”

Loose Leaf paused for a second, and then he snorted. "You know what the funniest part about all this is?" he wheezed. "They totally told us all that bullshit in grade school, and we never listened. I mean, it's like Teach actually knew what she was talking about or something. Kinda galling, almost."

I chuckled along with him, but for some reason my heart wasn't really in it. "So what are you gonna do now?" I couldn't help but ask.

"*Un momento, por favor,*" Leaf announced in an absolutely stars-awful accent before lighting up his horn and floating what looked like a boat ticket out of his bag and waving it in front of me.

"Tahayti?" I asked once my eyes zeroed in on the jittery slip of paper long enough to read the glossy letters embossed in gold on its front.

"That's right," Loose Leaf confirmed proudly. "Two weeks on island time without a care in the world. I didn't even plan it, Brick. Just got out of bed today and said, 'You know what, screw it. I'm gonna go on a cruise.' And as for what I'm gonna do when I get back, who the hell knows? That's the best part. For the first time in my life, I'm doing something that just makes me happy, something I should've done a long time ago. I've...you know what it feels like? It feels like I'm free again. Like I had these big ol' ropes around my legs for my whole life and now all of a sudden I found a pair of pruning shears and cut my way out. And I'm happy. I'm...look at me, I'm about to freakin' pop over here!"

Even though my chest still felt like it was filling with lead and I didn't have a clue why, I did my best to fight past it for my friend's sake. "You know what?" I said with a faint smile. "That's awesome, Loose."

Loose Leaf stopped in mid-babble and looked at me with about as much warmth as his widened eyes could manage. "You really think so?" he asked, the question paired with a grin that sent my stomach into a tailspin.

"Yeah, I do," I replied. "I think it's awesome that you're finally moving on from all that. I don't think I've ever even seen you this happy before."

"You haven't," Loose shot back with a friendly nudge in the shoulder. "'Cause I ain't never been this happy before. And oh, hey, you'll like this: I've got you to thank for it."

*All right, then. Color me baffled. "What?"*

"Oh, yeah. You're the only reason I've even got this ticket right now. 'Cause when I was doing the whole epiphany thing the other day, guess who I was thinking about?"

"This conversation's taking an interesting turn."

"Keep your mane on, you're not *that* good-looking. No, I just started thinking about the kind of pony I wanted to be, and I swear on the stars the first thing that came to mind was, 'I want to be like Brick Breaker'. I mean, you're, like, the definition of a free spirit. You said it yourself: I work for a living, and you're out here hunting down criminals and doing whatever the hell you feel like doing. And I thought about that and I told myself, 'That's what I want to be: a pony who does what he wants, who couldn't care less whether the mark on his flank is a sheet of paper or a magnifying glass or a frickin' garbage can.'

Loose smiled, and this time it was completely genuine. "And now that's what I am."

Fancy that. I was Loose Leaf's role model. I was the most important pony he'd ever met. I was the one who had inspired him so much that he changed his entire view of the world and started living his own life for the first time in years. So of course, it made perfect sense that hearing Loose say all that made me feel like the dirt between a hound dog's toes. What happened to the good old days when milk was a half-bit a gallon and my brain didn't go randomly manic-depressive on me every other freaking day?

"Hey, you all right, Brick?" Loose asked before I could bend my brow back out of the scowl it had fallen into. He really did sound concerned, I'll grant him that. And he had no reason not to be, if he really admired me that much. If he really thought he wanted to be just like me. If he really thought I was just peachy keen with the way my life had turned out.

"Oh...yeah, I'm fine," I assured him. The grin I put on was all teeth. "Hung over, if anything."

That got his spirits up again. "That's what I'm talkin' about!" he nearly shouted. "You're living life on the *edge*! Damnit, I don't think I've ever even gotten drunk once in my life. That's just...is that sad? That seems pretty sad. I mean, to a guy like you, that probably seems just pathetic. If I were you, I'd think it was pathetic. But then you'd be me and you wouldn't

be...I don't even remember what I was talking about. What the hell was I talking about?"

I gave a noncommittal shrug, partially because it wasn't like I had anything better to say and partially because it'd be a cold day in Appleloosa before anypony knew what the hell Loose Leaf was ever talking about. I was still trying to think of something to change the subject to when I noticed something odd out of the corner of my eye. Namely, that Equestrian First National Bank was six blocks behind us and wasn't doing a whole lot to catch back up.

"Hey, Loose?" I mumbled with my head still twisted towards the distant skyscraper.

"Sup?"

"Where are we going?"

After a quick glance up the street we were walking down, Loose Leaf stuck his bottom lip between his teeth and let out a thoughtful little hum. A moment later, he shrugged.

"No clue," he said. "I was following you."

"And I was following you," I sighed.

"Well...wait a minute."

"Brilliant..." I muttered under my breath.

"Dude, that's...kind of hilarious, actually."

"I'm laughing on the inside."

"No, it's like we're on the same wavelength. Like an old, married couple."

"So what, we're gonna start-"

"Finishing each other's sentences?"

"Oh, you're adorable."

"Love you too, honey."

"Loose, where the hell are we?"

"We are..." Loose Leaf said, dragging out the second syllable as he turned around in a full circle where he stood. "Right where we need to be," he finished a half-turn later, his slow spin jerking to a stop as an incredibly self-satisfied look washed over his face. "Check it out."

I checked it out. "Ye Olde Salt Shoppe," I read off the pink and blue neon sign hanging over the door of the squat brick building Loose Leaf was pointing towards. "How original."

"That's where we're going," Loose declared. "Right into...right here. Into this bar right here."

*Mm-hmm. And I'm a pretty princess with fairy wings and a God complex.* "You come here a lot?" I asked nonchalantly.

"Oh, totally. What, you think I'm making this up? Nah, dude, this is the place to be Friday nights around here. I come here all the time with my, uh...when my..."

"Pants are on fire?"

"When my pants are..." Loose Leaf blinked, and blew out a heavy breath. "Yeah, I have no idea where we are," he said. "But hey, when life gives you lemons, right? Let's get a drink. I gotta get in shape for the boat anyway. Don't wanna board tomorrow and be the only pony there who can't handle a mogeeto on the rocks."

"Mojito."

"Whatever. You in?"

I can't be the only one who hates it when you can't figure out what the hell your thoughts mean. I'd kind of had it in my mind that I wanted to get drunk alone today, but there was definitely a reason I felt like running for the hills right now, and that definitely wasn't it. I felt depressed, almost, but it was the kind of depressed that just came right out of nowhere and stuck around for hours like peanut butter to the roof of your mouth. And I wasn't going to figure out what caused it anytime soon.

So instead of listening to my gut and bluffing my way into a quick exit, I just nodded and said, "Sure, I'm in," because Loose was standing right there in front of me, and when your best and possibly only friend asks if you want to get a drink, you say yes. That's what friends do.

Loose Leaf grinned, and my stomach dove into my hooves. “All right, then,” he said, throwing a forehoof around my shoulders. “Let’s go get wasted, Brick.”

And there wasn’t any big revelation after that. I don’t know what I was expecting, but I never had any blinding moment of clarity where I realized what exactly the hell it was that was wrong with me. Not when I walked into the bar behind Loose, not when I took a stool at the counter and got a glass of bad whiskey I hardly even touched, not when I spent two hours pushing my drink back and forth in front of me while Loose learned through experience that chugging four ounces of straight scotch in a single gulp would be the number one cause of suicide in adult stallions if anypony else were stupid enough to do it. The whole time, I just stared at the puddle of condensation forming underneath my glass and waited for Loose to get wrecked enough for the bartender to kick us out. The whole time, my mind was clogged like my kitchen sink on leftover night.

And the whole time, all I could think was that, despite the fact Loose Leaf was sitting right next to me and talking to me and occasionally spilling his drink all over me, I had never felt so alone in my entire life. Anypony who wants to psychoanalyze *that*, good freaking luck.

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You know, I’ll never say that Loose Leaf’s not a nice guy, but I will say that he’s *really* bad at a lot of things. And as I was discovering now, item number one on that list of anti-skills was being graceful and composed when he was drunk off his ass.

“Yu’oh what...y’know what your problem is, Brick?” Loose shouted in my ear as we hung a left on Fetlock and passed by the green painted sign welcoming us to Sugarcube Hill. “You gotta *smile* more. Y’know?”

I nodded absentmindedly and kept my eyes focused on the ground. We’d been at the bar so long that the sun had already sunk down behind the office complexes we were trotting by now, and if I hadn’t known better I might’ve thought that the city’s designers *meant* for the sunset to shine right down the center of Fetlock Boulevard. “You don’t say,” I muttered back as I squinted down at the sidewalk to keep from going blind.

“Nah, ‘m serious, bro. I see you walkin’ around all the time, and you’re all, like...just a downer, right? Ever’pony loves a guy who smiles, ‘s



how you get friends. 'Cause... 'cause ever'pony loves a guy who smiles. I mean, look at me, I smile, an' I got fr-friends all over the place." A sloppy grin slid over Loose's lips, and a second later it oozed up into his eyes. "I'm the *liiiiife*'a th' par-*HIC*."

Loose Leaf stopped in place for a moment, his eyes unfocused and his Abba's apple bobbing up and down like a fishing lure with a twenty-pound trout on it. "...life'a the party," he finished in a mumble once his throat stopped twitching long enough to speak.

Normally, I would've at least tried to keep my eyes from drifting skyward, but Loose Leaf would be lucky if he remembered his own name after today, let alone whether I'd been less than supportive about it. And besides all that, my headache was kicking in again. "Is that all?" I asked in a monotone before my better judgment caught up with my steadily worsening mood.

"No, y'know what else? Y'know what you need? You need a fil...fillyfre...shit."

"Fillyfriend?"

"Yes. You need a fillyfriend, Brick. I mean, 'cause you're...an' I'm sayin' this as a friend, dude, but you ser'sly got it goin' *on*, y'know?" By now, Loose Leaf was spraying spit all over the road every time he ran into a hard consonant. "Like, you got the whole rugged, badass, bounty hunter thing goin' up here, and you...I don't know what you got goin' down there, I never..."

Loose Leaf coughed, then nearly collapsed onto my shoulder in a fit of surprisingly unmasculine giggles. I found a wispy gray cloud of factory smoke to stare at until he got himself composed enough to continue enlightening me with the wisdom Mr. Tack Daniels had imparted on him.

"Dude, I..." Loose eventually started to say in between wheezes. "I'm so *wasted*, man."

"You? *Nooo*," I assured him. "You're the pinnacle of health." All right, so sometimes I ignore my better judgment on purpose. Sue me.

"No bullshit?" Loose Leaf asked.

"Aw, course not. Friggin' Olympic champion over here, that's what you are."

Loose Leaf nodded vigorously and somehow kept himself up right while doing so. "Damn straight," he said with his tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth. "Barnacle of help, that's...that's really nice of you, Brick."

We took a right turn this time, onto Driver Street. The smoke column was even bigger now, but I couldn't for the life of me remember what the factory it belonged to was. And you know what else I couldn't remember? That time last night where I must've been smashing coconuts with my forehead or something, because there was no other logical reason it needed to be pounding like somepony was bouncing a soccer ball off of it.

"No, jus' listen for a...li-listen for a second," Loose begged me. I guess he'd forgotten that I hadn't actually said anything yet. "You...you are always so *nice* to me, and I...I'm tearin' up. Brick, my eyes're...yeah, I'm cryin'. I'm cryin' now."

Of course I couldn't remember which factory was over here: there weren't *any* factories over here. So that was a house fire I was watching, then. Awesome. If there was one thing my humble abode was missing, it was the smell of slow-roasting drywall seeping out of everything inside it. And yes, that was a rogue beam of sunlight that had just gleamed off a storefront window and stabbed me in the frontal lobe. Just what I needed to top off the day.

"I...I love you, Brick," Loose Leaf slurred. "Y'know, not like, uh...it's like a brotherly thing. You and me are like...like brothers, dude. From another...um..." Loose Leaf sucked in a breath and made a very interesting face, one that involved tucking his upper lip behind his bottom teeth and gaining the distinct appearance of a pony trying to crap out a bowling ball. "'S it hot out here?"

I closed my eyes as gently as I could and made a blind turn onto my street. This was starting to get downright unfair by now. Shouldn't I have had to be drunk too to have a headache this awful? Wasn't that how things worked in a fair and just world? And now even my nose was raw from all the smoke scratching around inside it. I'd probably smell like an ashtray for a week. All because some idiot put a squirrel in their microwave or something and lit up their house like the Summer Sun Celebration. All because somepony upstairs had decided long ago that today would be International Screw With Brick Day. All because I had decided to get up and go to work today.

And that was it. I'd had it. The world had been poking and prodding at me ever since I'd woken up that morning, and I was officially done with being civil about it. I was going to walk down this street, turn into my building, lock my door, and go to bed, and if Princess Celestia herself needed to wake me up between now and next month, then Equestria was just going to have to soldier on without me. I. Was Freaking. Done.

And usually, I try not to think what I thought right then. I try not to consciously look at a situation and say to myself, "This cannot *possibly* get any worse than it is now." It's not because of some sage, philosophical nonsense, and it's definitely not because I'm one of those ponies who's never seen a snafu that they didn't think would be all hunky-dory by morning. It's a much stupider reason than that: when it comes down to it, I'm just paranoid. Superstitious, if you want to get a little more specific about it. Because, see, I'm the type of guy who believes that somewhere off in the great blue yonder, there really are a bunch of all-powerful ponies lounging around and watching over us all, bigger and more powerful than any princess could ever be. And I also believe that those ponies, for lack of a better way to say it, have minds just like ours. They think, they reason, they fall in love overnight and regret it in the morning; just like all of us mortals, only with earth-shattering superpowers and better hair.

"Aw, sh...*Brick!*" Loose yelled suddenly, even his voice sounding a little unsteady at this point. "Dude, check out th' fire, man!"

That's not all, either. I believe that they like the same kind of things we do. Y'know, like good food, good friends, great wine and better mares. All the little pleasures of life here on good ol' Terra Hippos.

"No, ser'sly, *look* at it. Th' big building right over there. It's just...friggin'..."

Most of the time, I think they even like making us happy.

"Wait a se...hey, dude?"

But you know what the thing I believe most of all about those ponies is?

"Isn't that *your* building?"

Every so often, they just like being complete and total assholes.

My eyes shot open just as I nearly ran into the backside of a giant pegasus with a thick black firesuit on, but the half-second look I got at what Loose Leaf was pointing at was all I needed to see. The street was packed with carriages and ponies, half of the latter dressed like the pony standing in front of me and the other half made up of curious bystanders and the errant reporter or two. Overhead, a soot-blackened swarm of pegasi ferried clouds back and forth across the sky, wringing each one dry overtop a five-story building off to my right, the top floor of which was currently engulfed in convulsing orange flames. My building. My floor.

My apartment.

The firepony turned around and looked at me, his canary-yellow hardhat glistening at me in the flickering light of the growing blaze. He shouted something, I think, but he probably wasn't talking to me. I would've heard him if he were talking to me, and I couldn't hear anything right now except for splintering wood and a cacophony for more water over here and more clouds over there, and a faltering, almost incomprehensible voice that sounded almost, but not quite, like mine.

"That's my...that's my..."

I was dreaming. That was it. I was at the bar, passed out in a pile of drool after downing one too many Clyde Lights while Loose Leaf tried to fan the flies away from my thoroughly soused hindquarters. That *had* to be it. I couldn't really be standing here on *my* street looking up at *my* window watching *my* home go up in smoke. My luck couldn't possibly be that bad. The universe couldn't possibly hate me that much. There had be some kind of rules about these things, didn't there? Some line drawn somewhere where you could only have so many awful things happen to you in a single day before someone checked in and said, "All right, back it off, he's good for today." Bad things happened to bad ponies, and good things happened to ponies like me who just did their best with what they had. That was right. That made sense. That-

Somepony's hoof touched me on the shoulder, and I jerked back with every hair on my back standing on end. By the time my knees unlocked and my heart rate was no longer stuck on "hummingbird", my ears were working again as well.

“Stay back!” the owner of the hoof shouted behind my ears. It was the big blue pegasus again, his thick brown eyebrows hung low over his equally dark eyes. “We’ve got it under control!”

“That’s my...” I tried to say again, only to be ambushed from the side by a gasping mound of faded green fur that had moved a lot faster than what I would’ve considered to be logically possible.

“Oh, thank *heavens* you’re all right!” Mrs. Willow sobbed in my left ear, the only part of my head that wasn’t being crushed against her chest like an empty soda can. For a nine-hundred-year-old mare on a fixed income, she sure had one hell of a kung-fu grip. “I’ve been looking for you *everywhere*! They told me everypony got out safe, but there was smoke everywhere and I never saw you leave and...” Mrs. Willow gave me another squeeze, and a thousand little suns burst in front of my eyes. “Oh my stars, I’m just so happy you’re safe!”

*Fire. Old pony. Mothballs. Can’t breathe.* “I love you too,” I wheezed. “Please let go of me.”

Thankfully, Mrs. Willow’s hearing was better than I’d expected as well. As she released me from her grasp and I stared at my hooves until they grew back to their normal size, Loose Leaf decided to join us as well.

“Dude...” he said for what must’ve been the millionth time that day. “*Rough.*”

“And who’s this?” Mrs. Willow asked, still characteristically oblivious to the fact that I was more or less in full-blown shock by now, and also the fact that Loose Leaf was still off prancing about in La La Land. “Another one of your little friends?”

Loose Leaf guffawed, then put on a bashful, bleary-eyed look. “You’re pretty,” he said back. “She’s pretty, Brick.”

Mrs. Willow went pink under her fur, and my mind went numb with what I later determined was abject horror. “Oh...my,” she chuckled. “Aren’t you a charmer?”

“I’ll be anythin’ you—*hic*—want me to be...”

*Oh, sweet Celestia, change the subject. Change the subject now.* “What happened?” I managed to ask the pegasus without my bone-dry tongue getting in the way too much. “H-how’d this start?”

The firepony shrugged. "Not too sure yet, to be honest. Best we can figure, it all flared up on the top floor, on the far side over there. Might've been a candle tipped over, oven left on...no witnesses, far as we know, so I can't tell ya much ya don't see for yourself just now..."

"Well, now, that's not true!" Mrs. Willow piped up suddenly. "Dogwood here knows all about it!"

"Hey, yeah, totally!" Loose agreed. "You tell 'em, Bri...w-wait, what?"

"What are you talking about?" I said to Mrs. Willow.

"Why, that's where your apartment is, isn't it? On the far side, two doors down from me."

Of course. Leave it to Mrs. Willow to forget I'd spoken to her right before I left for work. "Well, yeah, but...I've been gone all day," I explained as gently as I could manage. "How could I have seen anything if I wasn't even th-"

Another thing about today I didn't see coming: Mrs. Willow cutting me off by way of a smack on the head and sending me spinning off into a whirlwind of stars and sunbursts. "Shame on you," she said firmly before I could even so much as whimper in agony. "You know better than to tell lies like that! Especially when this nice pony just wants to help!"

"What am I lying ab-" I started to moan until she smacked me again. "Ow! I'm an adult, damnit! Just talk to me!"

"You stop that this instant," Mrs. Willow ordered. "Not twenty minutes ago, I was going out to the store to get some wheat germ, and I saw you walk into your room and lock your door. Now you tell me why you have to make such a big to-do about a secret like *that*!"

"What I'm *telling* you is that I never..." My train of thought left the station just as a new one came screeching in. "Wait, wait, wait a second...what'd you say?"

"I said that I saw you walk into your room and lock the door," Mrs. Willow replied indignantly. "I suppose that was somepony else with the key to your apartment?"

The key to my apartment. Somepony had been in my apartment twenty minutes ago, and they had a key. But the lock on my door only had

one key, and it was in the satchel still slung over my back. She must have been seeing things, then, because there was no way that somepony could've just broken into my apartment without anyone hearing it, and have gotten out without anypony seeing him after the whole place went up in...

*...son of a bitch.*

"When did you see me?" I asked Mrs. Willow. "Exactly when did you see me last?"

"About twenty minutes ago, I said," she answered testily, though now there was a bit of concern sneaking into her voice.

I turned to the firepony. "When did the fire start?"

The stocky pegasus cocked an eyebrow, but didn't stay silent for long. "We got the call 'bout fifteen minutes ago," he said. "So...well, I reckon it'd be about twenty minutes ago that it all started too." Soon after that, his other eyebrow sunk down to join its partner. "Hold on..."

"Are you all right, little pup?" Mrs. Willow asked. And strangely enough, I was. As a matter of fact, I was better than all right. My shock was gone, and so was my confusion and my fear and the headache that had haunted me every hour of the whole damn day. For the first time in what felt like years, things was finally starting to click together for me. Somepony breaks into my apartment right through the front door, and a few minutes later the entire floor is burning and no pony knows why. I didn't need to put the puzzle pieces together anymore; I had the picture on the box sitting right in front of me. The printing was blurry and I couldn't make heads or tails of what it was supposed to be, but at least I had a shape to work with. And considering how my day had gone thus far, I was more than happy to take that and run with it.

But if I hadn't been in my apartment all day in the first place, then what was the point of setting it on fire? I didn't know any secrets dirty enough to justify this, and all my case files were at my office...stars above, what if they'd already burned everything there too? No, that wouldn't have made any sense either; if they'd wanted to kill me or make sure something I knew never saw the light of day, they would've just swung by that afternoon and plunked a Molotov down right in the middle of my desk. Torching my apartment as well would've just made it more obvious that it was a deliberate attack. So that only left two possibilities I could think of right

now. Either this whole debacle really was random and I'd just been the victim of an incredibly coincidental botched robbery, or somepony was trying to send me a message. And if somepony was trying to send me a message, then they'd want to make sure I got it.

Which meant that whoever that somepony was...

"He's still here," I said. "Whoever set that fire, he's still here."

"What?" the firepony and Mrs. Willow said in tandem.

"Dude..." Loose Leaf murmured under his breath, right before tipping over sideways with his legs stuck straight out and passing out on the sidewalk.

I decided to let Mrs. Willow take care of her now unconscious admirer and pushed right past the firepony, who didn't make any motion to stop me this time. Once I got out into the empty semicircle of pavement right beneath the building's front, I looked up at where my apartment had once been through its reflection in the puddles formed by the fireponies' efforts. I knew everypony in the crowd had to have noticed me by now, but in my mood I was in I couldn't have cared less. There were at least a hundred ponies out there who were completely irrelevant right now, and exactly one who wasn't. And I was going to weed him out.

Ever since I was a little foal, I've had this weird ability to pick out the tiniest of details in even the most chaotic of scenarios. It tends to come with an annoying side effect of missing the really big things sitting right in front of me and there really aren't a lot of practical applications for it out in the real world, but there's one thing it's absolutely perfect for, and that's finding somepony who doesn't want to be found. I couldn't tell you how I do it for a million bits, and between you and me it doesn't even work a good bit of the time. But when it does, it's like the whole world around me fades to black and white, and all I can see with any clarity is the one thing I want to pop up. It might be instinct. It's probably magic. At the moment, I didn't particularly care one way or the other. Right now, all I knew was that I wanted to find the bastard who started all this, and I was gonna run my special talent into the ground before I let him sneak away into the night without me having my say about it.

And call it fate or destiny or damnfool luck, but even with my whole body aching and throbbing all over, my special talent was still firing on all



cylinders. Just a few seconds after I left Loose Leaf and Mrs. Willow behind, I felt a tingly, almost painful itch on the side of my head, just to the left of my temple. I've learned over the years that when I get that itch, it's best to listen to it first and ask questions later, so I turned my head to the left and swept my eyes over the crowd. At the end of the first pass, the buzzing reached a crescendo, and suddenly I was staring at a button-nosed earth pony standing almost out of sight behind the sandwich shop on the corner. He was stoutly built and a bit on the short side, and had orange fur and a curly maroon mane I could just barely see poking out from underneath a dumpy gray jacket and hood. There was nothing at all remarkable about him: he wasn't breathing hard or sweating, his sleeves weren't charred black at the edges, he didn't have a kerosene canister hanging from his teeth. And yet that extra sense I had floating around in my head wouldn't let me look away.

The stallion was already watching me when he first caught my eye, but the same could be said for everypony with a hundred feet. For a long moment, we just stood there and stared at each other, and for a much longer moment I wondered what the hell I'd been thinking when I'd let my instincts tell me that this guy was responsible for burning down a whole city block. If Stubby over here was an arsonist, I was a ballerina. He wasn't even wearing shoes, for moon's sake. What kind of moron would set an apartment on fire without any shoes on? It was a weak reason to give up so quickly and I knew it much too well, but my sudden shot of inspiration was wearing off a lot quicker than I'd been expecting, and to be honest I was much concerned at this point about avoiding a repeat of the last time I'd suffered through a cutie mark failure. Specifically, the time I still had the chipped tooth and the singed eyebrows from.

I gave the other pony a few more seconds to do something other than stare back at me, then called it quits and let my eyes drop to the pavement. That whole self-confident trip I'd been riding high on when I'd walked out into the middle of the street was gone now, so I had plenty on situational awareness left to notice all the ponies whispering and pointing at me from the crowd. They didn't know why I was standing out there looking like a jackass, but I'm sure they have some very good ideas of their own. And the icing on the cake? This time, it was all my own neighbors who were staring at me and theorizing about me and wondering what on earth was rattling around in that little hollow space between my ears. I'd never been so thankful to have red fur, because it was the only thing keeping my face

from glowing brighter than the apartment I'd been planning on sleeping in tonight.

And for whatever reason, I chose that moment to look up at Stubby again one last time. There's an argument for saying that I just did it out of embarrassment, and another one in the notion that my special talent wasn't quite done just yet. Hell, you could probably even say I was just too desperate by then to throw away the one lead I'd even temporarily had. But whatever the reason really was, there was one thing no pony could ever debate: that moment I picked to look up one last time was the one moment about that day I'd remember for the rest of my life.

Because it was in that exact moment that I saw Stubby blink his eyes, let them widen to the size of dinner plates, and then take off in a dead sprint into the alley across the street.

# Chapter 5

## In Which I Discover The Importance of Cardio

Despite all the indecision and confusion I'd been suffering through the whole day, this time I didn't hesitate. In ten seconds flat, I was galloping into the same alleyway I'd seen Stumpy charge into, my heart already on overdrive and my eyes locked onto his wavy maroon tail as it vanished around a corner. I had no idea who this pony was, and I had even less of a clue about where he was going. All I knew was that my apartment was charring into cinders and he was running away from it, and that was reason enough for me to stick to this guy like green on grass until we got to a place where we could discuss the matter like grown stallions. Or barring that, at least a place where I could stand him up against a wall and beat him halfway into next week. To be honest, I kinda liked the sound of option number two at the moment.

"Hey!" I shouted after him as he skidded out of the alley into a tiny courtyard in front of a dilapidated hotel, and then turned hard to the right onto a one-lane side street. "Get back here, you little jerkoff!"

I guess he wasn't feeling too cooperative after that, which was probably why he chose right then to kick a trio of overflowing trash cans right into my path as I rounded the bend and caught sight of him again. The first one bounced off to the side and clanged against the back steps of a locksmith's shop, but there wasn't enough time to dodge around the other two. By the time I had shaken off the week-old collection of grass clippings and lettuce heads splattered all over my forelegs, the orange-furred pony was thirty feet away and still gaining speed. By the time I actually got clear of the trash and made it over to where the alley curved off to the left, he was nearly out of sight again.

That gave me pause for about a second and a half. Once that was over, I threw out a snort that'd turn a prizefighter white and took off again, my goal for what to do after catching him now firmly confined to the "beat the holy hell out of somepony" camp. If I were a cop, this would've been right around the time where I would've called for backup and waited to watch the scuzzball squirm under an overheated headlamp in a windowless think tank. But I wasn't a cop. I was a pony who, in a single day, had

spent the whole morning trying to look professional while nursing a hangover, been publicly embarrassed by an elite member of his society, and now had his home burned down before he was even done being evicted from it. As far as I was concerned, anything short of tossing this moron off the Statue of Harmony with an anvil tied to his tail was completely justifiable at this point.

Little Mister Stumpy Hooves up ahead was still running for all he was worth, and for a couple minutes I was mostly just trying to keep him in sight. But even though he was a good bit faster than me and didn't seem to be slowing down, he was also panicking, and that meant he was indecisive. So whenever he hit a fork in the road and held up for a split second to figure out which way to go, I gained another few yards on him. It was a slow process and my stamina wasn't exactly anything to write home about, but for the time being I was still making progress. And for the time being, that was just making Stumpy freak out even more.

Sooner or later, one of us had to slip up, and after pounding past six different alleyways and at least a dozen reasonably shocked bums and bag fillies, it ended up being Stumpy who went first. With fifty feet still separating us and my lungs searing as I sobered up from the adrenaline kick the fire had given me, he stopped on a tenth-bit right in front of an sunset-lit offshoot to the alley we were racing through, half his face set alight by the angled beam of light pouring over it. I couldn't have cared less about the reason why; I just wanted this chase to end. I covered the gap in a few lengthened strides, and lowered my head just as he looked over and saw me closing in. He gasped, I leapt forward, and the next thing I knew I was bouncing shoulder-first off a solid brick wall and he was running again, this time towards a fruit stand sticking halfway out across the entrance to the alley. In two hops, he was up and over it, and a moment later he leapt forward again and landed on top of a two-wheeled wagon packed from end to end with heavy wooden crates. After that, all I could do was watch from afar as the pony I'd been inches from smearing all over the side of a dry goods store effortlessly bounded from carriage to carriage, and crossed four packed lanes of traffic without ever touching the ground. Sometimes, even swearing isn't quite enough to cover everything.

"Well, two can play at that game," I told myself through gritted teeth. Working around my throbbing foreleg as best I could, I stepped forward and jumped up onto the fruit stand, much to the chagrin of the vendor below still recovering from the last idiot who'd decided to use it as a trampoline. I

muttered a half-flanked apology in his general direction, then stared out across the street to where Stumpy was just now touching down on the opposite sidewalk. Now all that stood between me and him was thirty feet of unbroken asphalt, completely covered with oblivious pedestrians and carriages with big, solid-looking wheels that could crush a pony flat before the occupants even felt a bump. And the longer I waited here, the more Stumpy's lead on me would grow. But no pressure or anything.

As the vendor continued to make very impolite assertions about my relationship with my mother, I set my jaw and scoped out the path I was going to take. The first gap I'd need to clear was about eight feet wide, and my target was a cart full of what looked like crates of bananas. And the pony pulling said cart was already staring at me, with thick dark eyebrows already lowered over very unsympathetic eyes. And he also happened to be about a foot taller than me. And about three times as heavy.

With a mark on his flank of what I was pretty sure was a sledgehammer.

"Oh, who the hell am I kidding?" I muttered under my breath. Two minutes and a severely bruised ego later, I had navigated my way across the street the normal way and trotted into the alley I'd seen Stumpy run into just a short time before. Predictably enough, he was already long gone.

A stray cat darted out of sight as I reached the spot where the alley split off into two opposite paths. The path to the left was where I'd seen the cat go, and that was just a dead-end into another cluster of trash cans and four stories of unbroken brick. The path to the right wasn't much better; it was longer by a good hundred yards or so, but it made up for it by being packed from end to end with ancient metal fire escapes, each one perfectly designed to ferry panicked residents down to the ground and ornery little firebugs up to wherever they wanted to hide. A full battalion of royal guards would be lucky to find him back here. This was pointless. And, more to the point, hopeless.

Well, maybe not *entirely* hopeless. I knew what this guy looked like, at least. It wouldn't count for much once the day ended and I had to start from scratch tomorrow morning, but it was a start. I'd found plenty of ponies before with less to go on than that. The catch, though, was those ponies also took months to find. And with the first case on my priority list being a foalnapping, the last thing I had at my disposal was free time to go chasing after a single arsonist who most likely didn't have a single thing to

do with it. Still, I wasn't ready to give up on my little shred of optimism just yet. Whether that was justified or just due to the fact that I was dizzy as a dodo bird from all that running was still up for debate.

I was in the middle of turning around and just starting to wonder where exactly the hay I'd just run off to when a shadow shifted in the corner of my eye. I stopped for a second and almost dismissed it as the cat I'd seen a second ago, but then the bricks off to the right twitched again. There wasn't any cat in the world with a shadow that big. Not unless that cat had hooves and a mane, and a dirty little secret about who had told him to set my apartment on fire.

I turned around slowly and faced the bank of trash cans I'd come so close to ignoring entirely. "I know you're back there," I said. "And I know it was you in my apartment earlier."

The trash cans were silent. "I'll make you a deal, all right?" I told him. *You come out now, and I won't strangle you with your own intestines.* "I'm not gonna hurt you. I just wanna know who you work for. Whoever it is never has to know. I won't tell him who told me. Just...just come on out now, and I promise we can talk about this nice and civilly."

Still no response. I figured that meant he was about three seconds from making a break for it. I crouched down low, counted to three, then leapt up and sent the whole row of trash cans flying out in front of me, towards the stray cat I had cornered with nowhere to run.

Or I would have, if the trash cans hadn't burst out towards *me* at the exact moment I started forward. And if Stumpy hadn't jumped out over them and me both in the same instant, and taken off down the alley like he'd been warming up for this moment all day.

The cans were empty this time, at least, but I had a bigger problem: Stumpy was on the move again, and this time he'd had a few seconds to think about where he was going to go. By the time my head stopped spinning and I figured out what in the holy hell had just happened, he was already charging towards the nearest fire escape. If he made it there and got the staircase down before I could reach him, he'd be gone for good. Time to stop screwing around and end this.

At first, luck was on my side: the stairs on the fire escape nearest to us were part of the way down already, but so coated with rust that Stumpy

couldn't budge them even after he took a running leap and threw his whole body weight on the bottom step. While Stumpy wasted his time trying to yank his escape route down to ground level, I flattened my ears against my skull and lowered my head into a charge. I was only twenty feet away when he saw me coming and dropped down again, his hooves scrabbling against the pavement as he tried to get his legs back in gear. If I'd skipped a donut run or two during the past week, I probably would've caught him right then and there.

Just as I got within hooves' reach, though, Stumpy turned on the jets and switched over to his backup plan. Thirty feet away, there was another fire escape attached to a building with much cleaner brickwork, and those stairs looked fresh as the day they were forged. A little better, even, considering the little hoof-tied rope somepony had left hanging off them after some late-night adventure. But even though I was huffing and puffing like an asthmatic wolf, I swear I felt my heart jump kick out an extra beat just at the sight of it. He was pulling away from me now, but the second he stopped to pull that staircase down, I'd be all over him. I had him this time. One last screwup, one last dive for that pull rope dangling just a little bit too high for a normal pony to reach, and I'd finally have my answers.

It was at the last possible second that Stumpy changed course, and that might've been why it took me a split second too long to register that he wasn't going for the rope at all. In the end, the reason didn't really matter: what mattered was that instead of heading underneath the staircase and closing his teeth desperately around the thick beige rope that controlled it, the pony in the dumpy gray jacket veered off to the left towards a pile of boxes and crates stacked behind a neck-high partition. I lost a step or two wondering what the hell he was doing, and that gave him all the time he needed to go ahead and show me. He took one last long stride up onto the first row of boxes, then hopped once, skipped twice, and jumped over the debris, onto the partition, and across twelve feet of open air to land safely on the second floor of the fire escape. Of all the things I could've imagined failing to account for, the stallion I was trying to catch being a goddamned Ponympic athlete honestly hadn't even crossed my mind.

I swore under my breath and kept going. If this guy thought he could shake me off that easy after I'd tailed him halfway to Trotton and back, he was gonna have another thought coming real damn quick. I knew colts on the long jump squad in high school. I was charged up, zeroed in, and pissed off beyond belief. I could handle this.

I glared at Stumpy long enough to make sure he saw me, then traced his path step for step and aimed for the partition.

*Step One: Stride.*

I planted my back hooves down hard and stretched my forelegs out over the first boxes. Stumpy gritted his teeth and whipped his head away from me.

*Step Two: Hop.*

The boxes creaked as my forelegs made contact. Stumpy was making his way towards the next flight of stairs. Too slow. Too late.

*Step Three: Skip.*

Up over the debris, up onto the partition. The muscles in Stumpy's neck were bulging beneath his fur.

*Step Four: Jump.*

I hit the partition hard, but kept my balance. Stumpy turned around just in time to see me take off, and for a fraction of a moment our eyes locked together again just like they had when we'd first seen each other. *Game over, buddy*, I thought. I bared my teeth, ducked my head, and stretched my hooves toward his throat.

And met air.

I'd closed my eyes at some point during the final descent, so it was a second or two before I realized that my head wasn't heading for a passionate rendezvous with Stumpy's sternum. And a second or two later after that, I also realized that the space below me that should've been full of fire escape was empty, and that my nose was about three feet away from an unscheduled rest stop in Roadburn Heights. Thankfully, I tucked and rolled fast enough to keep the pavement from rearranging my face, but that didn't do much to dull the blow of tumbling to a stop a few yards away and looking up to see a blurry orange earth stallion getting smaller and smaller as he climbed up the fire escape all the way to the top floor. From five stories above, Stumpy poked his head over the edge of the penthouse platform and looked down at me, then ducked back out of sight. A second later, the whole fire escape creaked, and Stumpy leapt up towards the wall and scaled it as easily as a spider could. I caught one last glimpse of his



wavy-tailed behind as he hoisted it up over the lip of the roof, and then Stumpy was gone.

I almost got up and went for the rope under the stairs right then, but at the last second I held back and kept my spot on the ground. I could've gone on chasing him, but I'd already spent the last ten minutes demonstrating quite clearly how useless that was. There was no two ways about it: the little bastard was faster than me, and judging by how heavy my legs felt right now he probably had me in the endurance department too. Showed what I got for looking at consistent exercise the same way other ponies look at root canals, I guess. The point was, burning off the last dregs of my head of steam to chase this pony across the rooftops of Manehattan was just going to be another waste of time to add to a whole string of them today. And that was assuming I didn't fall off one of said rooftops and get a one-way ticket to Splat City first.

I let my head fall back against the pavement and stared aimlessly up at the fading patches of blue and gold still poking through the clouds overhead. How had this even happened? I'd had him painted into a corner that no other pony I'd ever heard of would be able to slip out of, and he'd just jumped right over it. Right over me. Yeah, that was another thing he had going for him, wasn't it? A normal pony was lucky if he could clear a chest-high fence; Stumpy, meanwhile, could prance clean over my head in two steps. At every corner, he'd taken me completely by surprise, and that was why he was fiddling away on the roof and I was stuck down here, watching him run off and wondering how the hell he'd done it.

Well, I'd already said how he'd done it, hadn't he? He took me by surprise. He waited back behind those trash cans until I was just about to strike, and then he broke away right when I was too close to do anything about it. Lulled the predator into a false sense of security, then timed the escape perfectly to leave him gasping for air in the distance. Classic move. One I should've seen coming. One that I could feel my face going near purple with rage over. Or was that embarrassment? That was another possibility. As was pain. I'd hit the ground kind of hard a minute ago.

I think, in a way, that was when my new plan was first spawned: when I rubbed my forehoof over my freshly bruised shoulder and wished more than anything that I could get one last shot at the flankhole indirectly responsible for it. But to get that shot, I'd have to find him first, and I'd have to figure out how many building tops he was planning on bouncing across

before deciding to join the rest of us mortals down on Earth. Yeah, that was definitely where my plan came from, because it was right about then that I looked up at the sky again and let my eyes drift along to the right and over to the next building in the row, and then the next after that. And it was right about then that it occurred to me that even street-spanning duplex rows had to end someplace, and that not even Stumpy could clear a gap as big as the city streets that surrounded them.

Which meant it was right exactly then that a little inkling of an idea began to form inside my head.

I rolled onto my side and looked down to where the alleyway opened up again at the end of the block, then glanced back up at the fire escape again. Five minutes ago, I would've said there were only a couple things I could do now: either clamber up onto those catwalks and follow Stumpy across the roof, or quit while I was behind and wake up tomorrow even further back. But that wasn't completely true, was it? Because there *was* something else I could do instead. If doors number one and two didn't look promising, then I'd just have to go out through the window. I'd need a little bit of trickiness and a much larger bit of luck to pull it off, but it was definitely a possibility. And that meant the hunt was still on.

It was like the gears inside my brain had just gotten a fresh coat of axle grease. By the time I was all the way up on my hooves, I had everything figured out. Maybe I couldn't run as fast as Stumpy or jump as high, but I *could* play the game by his rules. I couldn't catch him, but I could sure as hell hunt him down. All it'd take was a little creativity, and a little natural instinct. Just like Stumpy would do it. Just like a lion hunting for dinner in the savanna.

And guess what, Stumpy? This lion here?

He's *starving*.

• • •

The sun had set hours ago, but as far as the residents of Manehattan were concerned, the night was still young and ripe for the taking. While the crowds had thinned a bit since earlier in the evening, the sidewalks were still hardly even visible for all the ponies trotting along on top of them. The streetlights were bright, the breeze was fresh and just slight enough to touch the night with a homely chill, and even the ponies themselves

seemed carefree enough. For the briefest of moments, the City That Never Slept was at peace.

At the Manehattan Public Library, the spindly black minute hand on the clock embedded in the central pediment ticked forward an inch, and the bell hidden behind it tolled nine times. As the echo of the final chime faded away, the front door of a condominium across the street swung open, and a short, stocky earth pony with orange fur and a wavy maroon tail poked his head out, his ears and mane hidden under a speckled gray hood. After an edgy glance in either direction, he stepped all the way out and hurried down to the end of the block. His shoulders were hunched and his gaze wove back and forth through the ponies crowding around him, almost as if he were searching for one of them in particular.

At the corner, a herd of ponies stood clumped loosely together, most of them looking up at the magically enhanced globe that glowed cherry red over the crosswalk and dyed the parallel white lines beneath it a dim shade of pink. Instead of dodging around the cluster of Manehattanites, the stocky pony trotted straight towards them, and squeezed into the middle of the pack just as the otherworldly color inside the orb swirled from red into a bright emerald green. Once the light changed, the whole group moved as one mass, and they would've remained that way for another few blocks if the newest addition to the crowd, too short to be seen by anypony more than a few feet away, hadn't peeled off to the right just before they reached the curb. The herd behind him oblivious to his actions, he jogged off alongside the street he had just crossed with his eyes still sweeping over everything he passed, sticking to the shadows as much as he could and using the bodies of other ponies to shield himself from the view of any carriages rumbling by on the street. Almost as if he expected the pony he was looking for to be searching for him in return.

The orange pony kept the same pace for another three blocks, and then with one last impressively unsubtle glance behind him, he slowed to a steady walk and let a heavy sign escape his lips. His relief was written all over his face: he'd spent two hours hiding on the roof of that condo until he was as sure as he could be that the coast was clear, and yet the whole way down the street he'd been absolutely sure that he was only a single errant glance away from having to make another frantic escape. But for whatever reason, the stars had seen fit to give him a reprieve this time, and that suited him just fine. With the spring of freedom in his step, he pushed himself back into a brisk trot and kept it up for another six blocks, until he

had left the bustling mercantile quarter behind him and entered a place that felt a little bit closer to home.

The southern tip of the Manehattan Peninsula is taken up almost entirely by Rocky Feller Plaza and the surrounding financial district, with the Hostler River forming a natural border to the south and west, and Sugarcube Hill located about half a mile to the north. To the east, however, lies a small neighborhood about twelve hundred yards square called Amity Park City. Centered around a massive textile plant and crowded with shops catering to the Rocky Feller crowd, the borough was once a bustling microcosm of middle-class Equestrian society. When the plant closed down six years before Princess Luna's return, though, the foundation the community was built on crumbled and dissolved in a matter of weeks. Now, Amity Park was a virtual ghost town, filled with more potholes than ponies and left to rot by a city that couldn't be bothered to tear it down. It was grimy, dreary, and a detestable eyesore for the ponies who lived and worked in the skyscrapers still visible in the distance, and that meant it was the safest place in Manehattan for anypony who didn't want to be found. That was where the orange-coated pony was going now, and that was where he would burrow so deep into the cracked streets and deserted tenements that it'd take an entire division of the Canterlot Royal Guards to root him back out again. Maybe even two.

West River Street marked the unofficial divide between Amity Park and the rest of the city, and the orange pony slowed to a meandering shuffle once he crossed over it, shrugging off his hood as he did so to reveal an unkempt mane that shared the same color as his tail. The streetlamps in this part of town were still functioning, but every third or fourth lantern was burnt out or broken, and in some cases was missing entirely. This pony didn't seem to mind too much, though, if his habit of bounding between patches of darkness was any indication. All things considered, it was probably better if no one could see him right now. The fewer ponies who saw scuffed hooves and dirt-streaked face and got a chance to put two and two together, the better.

A flash of red in the distance caught the orange pony by surprise, and instinctively he flinched back into the nearest doorway the instant it flitted into his view. With his teeth clenched tight and his breaths coming in short, staccato bursts, he pressed himself as far into the alcove as he could, only daring to peek back around the corner once he'd waited so long that his legs were starting to wobble with how hard he had them locked at the

knees. Once he did look, though, his shoulders sagged, and he let out a high, shaky chuckle that reverberated all the way down to where the street ended at a vacant lot stuffed with broken-up carriages and compost heaps. He'd just about blown a gasket seeing his reflection in a store window. He laughed again and turned his head to the side, his lips parting into a grimace as he noticed the grey smudges still lining the back of his neck. He'd need to get cleaned up while he was out here, too. If anypony out there was still chasing him, they'd probably be able to see *and* smell him coming before too long.

Despite the murkiness the pony was wading through, his face still visibly darkened as he turned away from the shop window, and it wouldn't have been hard for an onlooker to figure out what was on his mind now. He'd cut it way too close sticking around to watch the blaze he'd set, and this was what he was going to get for it: a whole night of jumping at his own freaking shadow, because every single one looked like it belonged to a brick-red earth stallion with a short brown mane and a wicked case of post-traumatic rage. "Stupid," he muttered under his breath as he started walking again. He was stupid. Setting that fire was stupid. This whole thing was stupid, and it was his own stupid fault for screwing it up so bad. He went ahead and told himself so under his breath: "Stand out in the middle'a the damn road, why don't you? He'll never think to look there. Could've been back hours ago, but no, you had to go and let him see you. You had to let him chase you all the way across the freakin' -"

The pony stopped, then perked his ears and swiveled his head around. The alley to his left was empty, and so was the side street on his right. But he could've sworn...

He wrinkled his nose, then swore under his breath. "C'mon, Springs," he growled to himself with a heavy sigh. "Get it toge-"

With a lowly whisper, the breeze fell silent, and a piece of paper crinkled somewhere off in the distance. And then the next thing Springs knew, his rump was pressed flat against the wall behind him and his lungs were heaving for breath, and his eyes were locked in on a single green bottle rolling out from the shadows of the alley across the street. The bottle tumbled out onto the sidewalk and fell into the gutter with a soft *clink*, and after that the night was still.

"W-Who's there?" Springs called out, his jaw continuing to shake even after he ground his teeth together and shut his mouth so tightly that

his lips went white around the edges. In the darkness beyond his vision, a second bottle dinged against the pavement, and a moment later a third one shattered completely. "I know you're back there!" he shouted. "I can see you! I'm comin' after you, you little..."

His threat froze in his throat, and Springs stood stock still and listened. No hoofsteps running. No returning shouts. The other pony wasn't leaving. The other pony was calling his bluff.

"Just go," Springs hissed through his teeth. "Just go." He blinked the sweat out of his eyes and stared straight ahead into the shadows of the alley. There was nothing there. He could see where the third bottle had broken, just below a whole row propped up on and around a decrepit wooden crate. There was *nothing* there. The alley was definitely empty. It might've just been a sewer rat. He might still be perfectly safe.

It probably wasn't. *He* probably wasn't.

"Just go."

With a shuddering sigh that bordered on being desperate, Springs took to his hooves. Somewhere in this district was a place he could hide, where he could sleep and eat and bide his time until the world lost interest in him again, and all he had to do was get there before this other pony did. Except now every time his sole hit the ground, there was an echo behind him. Now he was running, and someone—or *something*, Celestia forbid—was giving chase. Grunting with either frustration or terror, he shifted up into his maximum speed, the ancient buildings and rusting lightpoles whizzing past as his mane slapped against his face and his jacket billowed out in the wind.

Three blocks later, there were still two sets of hoofsteps cutting through the night, and Springs was only a minute or two away from running on fumes. He could outrun just about anypony in a pinch, but he wasn't built for distance and he knew it all too well after the day he'd had today. This was going to end sooner rather than later, and if he couldn't get away within the next thirty seconds, that end was probably going to lead to a fight. And in a fair fight, he'd be smeared halfway across the neighborhood before he could so much as duck. Which meant there was only one thing left for him to do now.

It was time to start cheating again.

Springs waited exactly three seconds, then dug his forehoof into a gap in the cobblestones and made a blind turn into a narrow space between a boarded-up dress boutique and a pawn shop with two sputtering candles on either side of the door. It wasn't clean by any means, but he squeezed through the crevice with only a couple scrapes and popped out on the other end to find himself sprinting down yet another nearly pitch-black backstreet, with only the gentle glow of the waxing moon overhead keeping him from bouncing off the walls again. His hooves pounded down the inky road, each step producing a powerful crack that sounded for all the world like a bone snapping in two, like a nail being driven into a coffin.

The back lane spit him out onto Saffron Street, but Springs couldn't have cared less what the road's name was. It was empty and it was going to get him where he needed to go, and for now that was more than enough. He risked a glance behind him, saw nothing, pushed on, looked back again and nearly fell flat on his face tripping over a bump in the road; he was wheezing for breath by now, and most of those breaths were wasted on the frenzied fragments of sentences that dribbled out of his mouth as his exhausted mind narrated his progress.

"Come on...come on...two more blocks...come on...one more...keep going...keep going...just leave me alone...just leave me *alone*."

Just a few yards ahead, a cast-iron fence cordoned off a small smattering of storage units that took up the entire end of the block. With a final groan, Springs took flight off a dumpster and vaulted the fence, then collapsed once he rounded the corner and stopped by way of slamming into the wall and flattening against it for all he was worth. The textile plant loomed up overhead a hundred yards away, two of the now defunct smokestacks blocking off either side of the moon so that only a small sliver of ghostly white light slipped through to illuminate the unit doors and the pony crouching in front of them. That pony, however, didn't seem to be the type to appreciate the beauty of nature set against the backdrop of urban sprawl; in any case, he wasn't looking at the moon right now. He was looking straight at the corrugated metal door of the unit on the other side of the entrance into the lot, his mane slick with sweat and his ears twitching and jumping almost as much as he was. He was listening for hoofsteps, for the pony following him. If he heard him coming, he had just backed himself into a corner that he wouldn't be escaping from. If he heard nothing, he was, for the time being at least, safe.

He heard nothing.

Springs kept his sigh of relief as quiet as he could manage, and slumped into the wall just before his wobbling knees pitched him onto the ground. For a long while, he just stood there with his forehead pressed against the brick, his chest still heaving and a weak chuckle floating out of his mouth every moment or two. "Holy shit," he muttered to himself, another laugh bubbling out of his throat at the tail end of the curse. Two narrow escapes a day was more than enough for him, it seemed. He was ready to get off the streets, and this storage lot was just the kind of five-star establishment he was looking for. It wasn't the best hiding place, sure, but in the present situation it would do well enough for one night.

The thing about hiding places, though, is that they all hinge on the seeker giving up before he can find you. Skill never plays into it; the whole effort is a simple test of will where the prey gets a step or two ahead and dares the predator to come find him if he can. And you know what the thing about predators is? They don't give up. They don't get bored or discouraged or decide that tomorrow's just as good a time to eat as today. When a predator is locked onto his prey, there is neither rain nor snow nor meteor strike that's going to shake him off until he's good and ready to call it finished. Like when a werewolf in the Everfree corners a rabbit. Like when a lion in the savanna hunts down an impala. Like when a pony in Manehattan wants answers and doesn't care how far he has to go to get them.

So when Springs turned around and found himself nose to nose with a brick-red, brown-maned earth stallion whose eyes were set on "barbeque", I really don't think he should've been all that surprised. After all, I'd made him a promise that we were going to have a nice, civil conversation with each other before the day was done. And Brick Breaker doesn't break his promises.

"Howdy," I said, putting on an absolutely winning smile as Springs' eyes widened and his jaw dropped to his hooves. I caught him by the shoulders just as he started to turn around, and with one gentle push I had him shoved up on his hind legs against one of the storage units with my hooves placed nice and civilly on either side of his throat.

"Y'know, I don't think I ever properly introduced myself before," I remarked cordially as the metallic clang of Springs' skull hitting the unit's



door echoed along the deserted street a few yards away. “Hi there. My name’s Brick Bricker. You probably know me pretty well, don’t you?”

I paused, and Springs tried to squirm away. Like most other things he had tried in the last few minutes, it didn’t go well. “Or actually, I guess you probably know my apartment a bit better. You remember my apartment, right? Probably sticks out in your mind a little bit, doesn’t it? Y’know, seeing as it was on fire and all.”

“How did you find me?” Springs grunted raspily, as if there was something blocking his throat and keeping him from speaking clearly. Must’ve been that dry night air.

“How did I find you...” I repeated, my laugh sounding more like a cackle. I was probably enjoying this just a bit too much, in retrospect. “You’re a lot of things, Springy, ol’ pal. Slimy, irritating, idiotic, bit on the ugly side too, actually. But if there is one thing, buddy, that you are *not*...”

My good cheer vanished, and even Springs’ pupils seemed to shirk away and try to hide from the daggers my eyes were throwing at him. “It’s *subtle*,” I whispered, the whole back of my neck tingling with adrenaline. Yeah, I was definitely enjoying this too much. I promised myself I’d apologize for that once I kicked the bastard’s teeth straight through his lungs.

“But I never saw...” Springs started to say before his eyes drifted up and his neck went slack. He was looking up at the four-story tenement row behind me. Or more specifically, at the warped, twisted old fire escape that snaked up its back side and was nearly level with the roof of the storage units at the second floor.

“Yeah, didn’t think I had it in me, didja?” I remarked, while thinking to myself that it wasn’t technically gloating since the path I’d taken hadn’t really been all my idea. “Who says an old dog can’t learn new tricks?”

Springs swallowed hard, and the tiny bulge in his neck kept shivering even after he was done. “L-Look, just lemme expla-”

“No, you know what, Springs?” I interrupted, my eyes shut tight with the effort of keeping a lid on what my gut was telling me to say. “I’m sure you’ve got just the most charming little excuse for why you had to set my apartment on fire, but I have had a really, *really* long day today, and quite frankly I’m not really in the mood to be talked at anymore. So how ‘bout,

just for a little bit, you keep your speedy little trap shut and let me do the talking? Sound good?"

Springs' lips went tight, and a little bit of heat seeped back into his eyes. I ignored the implications and took that as a "yes". "Wonderful," I said. "And if you don't mind, let's go ahead and start with who told you to come after me today."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Springs replied bitterly, though not nearly as steadily as I think he was aiming for.

"Oh, you don't, huh?" I murmured back. "So what, Mom just forgot to tell you not to play with matches, then?"

"I didn't set your apartment on fire," he growled. This time, his voice was strong and clear. Rotten luck for him I was too busy laughing to care.

"*Bullshit*, you didn't," I came back loudly. "What the hell were you doing, then, Springs? You gonna tell me you led me halfway to the friggin' moon and back 'cause you had to make a milk run?"

"I didn't do it," Springs repeated. I looked off towards the sky and felt an almost painful shudder run through my forelegs.

"But I know who did," he added a moment later, still not looking me in the face. For the moment, I decided to let his indelicate behavior slide. The side of my head was itching something fierce.

"Is that a fact?" I crooned. "You know who torched my apartment? Well, damn it to the moon, Springs, I would just *love* to know who did that."

"Yeah, okay, just...it was, uh..." he stuttered. Seemed Springs wasn't very good at stalling either.

"Y'know, that's just fascinating, Springs," I said. "But there's something else I'd love to know too. You want to take a guess at what else I'd love to know, Springs?"

"I..."

"I'd love to know what it is behind me that's so damn interesting you just can't take your eyes off it."

I've heard a hundred different names for the look that passed over Springs' face just then, but my personal favorite—and by far the most

accurate—is the “oh shit” face. It was the same look he’d had when our snouts had bumped together a couple minutes ago, and the same look I’d had when I’d walked in on my bachelor pad being turned into charcoal earlier that afternoon. It was the look everypony got when something happened that completely blindsided them, when somepony took their carefully laid plans and tossed a big honkin’ monkey wrench right in the middle of them. And the best part was, I hadn’t really even needed to work all that hard to get this wrench up in the air. Springs’ eyes had been darting over my shoulders every five seconds since we’d started talking. I guess he’d thought I wouldn’t notice from all of six inches away. He really was utterly hopeless at this.

“What do you not want me to see back there, Springs?” I continued. Hell, he was even looking back there again right now. The guy couldn’t have been a more of an amateur if he’d gotten indignant and threatened to call his lawyer. “Hmm? Is this where you were gonna hide tonight? Is this where the pony who *really* set that fire is?”

Springs wasn’t talking, and he also wasn’t shifting his eyes back over to me. I had a brief notion that now was probably a good time to stop screwing around and actually look behind me, but one look at the way Springs’ chest was heaving was all I needed to dismiss that. I was cold, homeless, and I had a stitch in my side that felt like somepony had stabbed me with a hoof file, and I had the colt responsible for all of it literally with his back against the wall. Constant vigilance could wait at least another five minutes. Right now, I had some karmic rebalancing to do.

“What’s over here, you little flankhole?” I asked, in a low, feral snarl that I’d spent years perfecting. “What are you looking at?”

Springs blinked, the corners of his mouth twitched, and then he finally looked me in the eyes again. “Nothin’,” he said quietly.

I turned around just in time to catch a size nine<sup>1</sup> hoof right in the muzzle.

Now, I’m not one of those ponies with titanium ‘nads who thinks their whole bodies are made of the same stuff, but most of the time I can take

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this story, I’m operating under the assumption that pony shoe sizes use [the same numerical measuring system as horseshoe sizes](#) in our world.

more than a few hits before I go down for the count. A blind sucker buck to the face, however, tended to skew the average a bit, especially when it came from what seemed to be a full-grown rhinoceros. I shut my eyes just in time to miss the sky filling with stars, but a moment later I could see plenty of them even with my eyes screwed up and my forehooves clamped over my nose. Not that it really hurt *that* bad or anything. Just basic instinct, that's all. You knock a guy hard enough in the snout, he's gonna tense up a little bit. It was a perfectly natural reaction. I was fine. I just needed a little peace and quiet, about five minutes to get my sense of balance back, and enough triple fudge brownies to sink a sea pony. Then I'd be fit as a freaking fiddle.

Somewhere far off in the impenetrable distance, a stallion was talking in a voice that made it sound like he was about ready to bite somepony's head off. As I dizzily got my hooves back under me and got busy with the valiant effort of keeping my breakfast in my stomach where it belonged, my brain eventually unscrambled enough to translate the loud, angry noises into words.

"...think you cut that close enough, ya big oaf?"

"But you tol' me to stay hidden."

"*Until* I came back. Did that part just not make it through customs, Blockhead?"

"You tol' me-"

"Stars abo... *I know what I told you.* It's called critical thinking, Cinder. Looking at a situation and making your own freaking decision about it. Really not that hard."

"But you tol' me I'm not supposed t' make my own decisions."

In the darkness, somepony groaned. "Well, whaddya know...boss hires a pony big as an elephant, and now he's got the memory of one too. That's just precious."

"I got what now?"

"Just shut up, Cinder Block."

For about half a second, the waves of nausea crashing over my stomach leveled out, and I took the opportunity to stand all the way back up

for the express purpose of marching right on over to those two voices and opening up an Ursa-sized can of whoop-ass *pronto*. I was just over a foot off the ground when the tide came back in, and the throbbing spot on the front of my nose was the first part of me to crash into the pavement again. Okay, so basic motor functions were probably gonna be out of commission for a while. Fine, then. I could work around that. If I couldn't get up and physically maim anypony, the next best thing was verbal abuse. I just needed one devastating insult, or one insufferably cocky one-liner. A half-decent pun, even. And whatever it was, I needed it fast before the moment was gone, before Springs realized I wasn't skipping off with the Sandmare just yet and sent Brutus the Wunder Pony after me again. I racked what was left of my brains for a second, then swallowed hard and opened my mouth.

"Ow," I said.

There was a long moment where nopony spoke, and during that time I cracked my eyes open for the first time in at least a minute. In the split second I managed to keep them open, I saw Springs standing next to a shadowy, muscle-bound silhouette that would've blocked out the moon if it'd been standing a bit farther to the right. The huge pony's face was too dark to see clearly, and Springs' brow was creased with equal parts confusion and exasperation.

"Stars above, he's still awake," the higher of the two voices—Springs, I figured—said. "How hard did you hit him?"

"Pretty hard," answered the deeper voice. That must've been...the other pony. Cinder something.

"You didn't knock him out?"

"I didn't wanna hurt 'im."

"Oh, for...he had by the *throat*, Cinder!"

"Well, maybe he had a good reason."

"What...the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I dunno. What'd you do to him, anyway?"

I still hadn't worked up the courage to open my eyes again, but I had a pretty good idea of where Springs' forehoof was even without them.

"Cinder, we went ov...I don't even know how many times we went over this. We're doing all this because..."

Springs paused, and I ended up squinting up at him just to check whether he was looking at me. He was. "You know what, forget it. I'll explain it later. Just hit him again."

"Huh?" Cinder replied slowly. My eyes were open all the way now.

"Oh, I'm sorry, did I go over that too fast? Hit. Him. Again."

"W-Whoa, hey, wait a minute, guys," I sputtered a bit drunkenly as I fumbled my hooves around to find purchase on the road. "M fine down here, actually, so you really, uh, really don't have to do tha-"

The good news was, Cinder didn't buck me any harder the second time. The bad news was, that second buck still felt about as good as taking a piledriver from a buffalo. "Okay, yes, good, I surrender," I groaned. "Can we cease with the kicking now, plea-"

The third one was definitely harder, though. "Seriously, is this really necessa-"

As was the fourth. "Celestia on a bike, just stop it alrea-"

I went ahead and shut up for good after the fifth shot to the braincase. I still didn't cry, though. Tearing up was different from crying. So was curling into a ball and letting out a little moan that somepony not listening very well might misinterpret as a whimper. Similar, but different.

"Luna above, are you even trying?" Springs grumbled loudly, which from my perspective just made him sound like he was trying to sing the National Anthem underwater.

"I t'ink that one did it," Cinder said confidently. Springs and I both begged to differ, my own reasoning being that ponies who were unconscious generally couldn't feel exactly how fast the earth was rotating through every bone in their body.

"He's still moving, moron," Springs snipped back, his forehoof pressed between his eyes again. "I told you to *hit* him."

"Do we really gotta knock him out, Springs?" Cinder asked. An excellent question, in my opinion. And one with a very simple answer.

“No, we can go ahead and skip that part, thanks,” I said to Springs. Or at least, I think that was what I’d intended to say. What actually came out of my mouth went more along the lines of, “Nahwashinhaskitapartank.” Turns out, it’s actually pretty tough to enunciate when your lips are numb and your tongue won’t move off the roof of your mouth.

“You mean, did the Boss tell us we had to?” Springs clarified as he met his partner’s eyes, his mouth pursing into a contemplative look. “No, he didn’t say that,” the orange pony admitted. Now his thoughtful expression was curling into a smirk. “He also didn’t say we couldn’t.”

*Hey, legs? This might be a bad time, but any time you wanna, y’know, start working again, that’d be just peachy.*

“You sure?” Cinder said. “Cause I don’t know if that’s really what he meant...”

“Cinder Block,” Springs said firmly as he rolled his shoulders and stretched his neck. “Shut. Up.”

Cinder Block shut up, and then it was just Springs and I staring at each other without saying a word, he standing over me with quickly darkening eyes and me trying to figure how I had started my day broke and hung over and was about to end it beaten to a pulp in a grungy storage complex halfway across town. How the hell does all that happen to one pony in twenty-four hours? And why did it all have to be happening to me right now?

“You know,” Springs murmured, raising his voice just loud enough for everypony in attendance to hear him. “I really think I’m enjoying this just a bit too much.”

Oh, yeah. Karmic rebalance. That explained it all. Now if only I could remember the box of baby kittens I must’ve eaten at some point to earn it, my life would make sense again.

“Sweet dreams, Bricky, ol’ pal,” the orange pony said. I would’ve said something snarky back, but the words were still on their way up from my lungs when Springs’ hoof smashed into the side of my head. The lot went fuzzy, and a bell started ringing somewhere close by. And as much as I’d like to say that I fought off the blackness pulling at the edges of my vision as long as I could, senselessness looked pretty damn heavenly at the moment. A pony can only take so much before he cracks, you know. And

after the day he'd had, this pony here was officially split right down the freaking middle.

I was out cold before my head hit the ground.