

Children of the Sun

By Vanner



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Prologue

The War to End All Wars

If you hadn't been born five years ago, the rising of the sun seemed routine. Fillies and colts took for granted that the sun would come up every morning, and that the moon would come out every evening. If they had been there to watch the sun falter, or if they had seen the moon hang in the sky for weeks on end, they too would have praised the miracle of the sunrise every morning.

Everypony had seen the cost of the Lunar Rebellion: A tyrant banished to the moon, a goddess left in tears at what she had been forced to do, and a populace that had been left broken in the wake. As it was, no pony had seen Celestia in those five years following the banishment of Nightmare Moon. So shaken by what she had done, the goddess went into exile, and walled herself in her castle at Canterlot.

When the armies of the night marched on the palace, they thought they brought with them the ideal of a republic headed by Nightmare Moon. What they failed to understand was that the Lunar Republic was just another despotism hiding under the guise of freedom. It was often said that Luna herself would have never approved of marching on the palace, but Nightmare Moon had pushed aside the quiet alicorn's desires to replace them her own. Honeyed words whispered into the ears of the Princess, along with her own loneliness and some unknown force from beyond had taken away the love between the sisters, and created the monster that ascended to power.

The followers of Nightmare Moon had called themselves the Lunar Republic, and at the low levels they operated as such. Elections were held, representatives chosen, and issues were voted upon. The biggest supporters of the Lunar Republic had come from the ranks of the so called lesser equines, that is, the donkeys and mules. Maligned by their pony-centric world, the voices of the rebellion urged them to join the struggle for the Lunar Republic, and throw off their shackles of slavery.

It was all a farce. The flaws in the system began to reveal themselves as

the lesser equines realized that power didn't flow from the ponies, but was instead wielded as a hammer from the top of the heap. The ponies tried to make slaves of the mules and donkeys again as Nightmare Moon would make slaves of them all. The equines left the fold, and searched for a way to bring their Luna back from Nightmare Moon's grasp.

Through the fighting and revolutions, ponies had come to revel in the art of war. Before the Lunar Rebellion, Equestria had come to symbolize peace and harmony throughout the world. After the Lunar Rebellion, ponies had forgotten what peace was like, and like a mother who leaves her children home alone for too long, the ponies of Equestria began fight amongst themselves. They came to expect violence against each other, and they reveled in cruelty toward their fellow ponies. They sought to divide up their country, and make their own fiefdoms. A dark time had swept over Equestria since Celestia's exile. It had only been five years. How could Equestria stand for even five more?

Many ponies did little more than complain about their failing empire. Others moved on into the Zebra territories to start a new life. Some simply found the highest cliff to throw themselves from and dashed themselves against the jagged rocks. Still others sought to take advantage of the creeping anarchy, and made their own greedy bids for power.

Power wasn't hard to come by in those days. You simply told ponies you were in charge, and if they argued, you beat them until they complied. It wasn't quite slavery, but it was the sort of brutal anarchy that comes without a functioning government. True, there was a charter of sorts for the Princesses to follow, but no pony had seen either one for five years. Without the monarchy to guide them, Equestria had descended into squabbling fiefdoms that routinely fought for land and power. Combined with the threats from the outside world, and the growing blight that had become the Everfree forest, the future of Equestria was grimmer than ponies were willing to admit.

A few brave souls weren't willing to let the glory of Equestria fade that easily. Remnants of Celestia's Knights sought to keep order where they could, but their heavy handed tactics of interrogation and inquisition during the time of the rebellion had left a bitter taste in the mouths of most ponies. Celestia's Knights sought to redeem themselves for their crimes of the past by bringing hope of a new future, but without the support of the citizens,

they were powerless to stop the flood of despair that threatened to drown Equestria.

Even those most devoted to Celestia had taken to zealous worship outside of the summer palace at Canterlot. Hundreds of monks chanted and prayed everyday at her walls. Every day they begged for a sign from her, and every day they were greeted only by sunrise and sun set. The palace square had become a little more than an echo chamber for hundreds of prostrate ponies begging for their ruler to return.

Still, even in the darkest night, there are the star lights of hope that emerge from the most unlikely of places. Some ponies had decided to make their world a better place; normal ponies with normal lives that were willing stand up for the common folk. This is the story of four heroes who, in finding each other, found that Equestria was worth saving after all.

Chapter 1

Down on the Farm

Our tale begins in Bridleburg, an unassuming mining town on the edge of the buffalo territories. Bridleburg was many things. It was prosperous. It was thriving. It was safe. At the same time, Bridleburg was also a difficult place to live, as everything about it stemmed from the great mines that burrowed beneath the surface of the city. The city had been founded a hundred years before the rebellion, and had prospered from the wealth of gems and minerals that flowed from its mines.

Because of the unique landscape of the region, there was little topsoil in the surrounding area, and the limestone bedrock started at three feet. When earth ponies came to the area to settle, they were fortunate to have brought with them unicorns who knew how to blast rock. The earth ponies hauled away the rocks, and used them to create houses. From that relationship grew Bridleburg. Water came from the Dame River, gems and minerals came from the earth, and the farmers worked the fields.

The few farmer ponies that inhabited the region had always had a difficult time making every harvest count. The thin topsoil became depleted quickly, and they were always scrambling to find new ways to renew the soil. Each year brought forth the simple question: Will we produce enough to feed everypony?

One such farmer was Heart Chase. Had she not been taught from an early age the lessons of discipline and honesty, she probably would have succumbed to desires for power that infected Equestria. As it was, she only held dominion over her family's farm, and guided it with a gentle hoof toward newer and greater heights every year. Again and again, she proved to be a savvy business mare with a keen sense for value.

In her eyes, everything had worth. It was her special talent to seek out that value and nurture it to fruition. She cared little for the world outside of Bridleburg, and indeed for the world outside her farm. Still, she knew the world around her was headed down a dark path, and there seemed to be

no way for her to stop it. She was a practical pony after all, and saving Equestria was the stuff of heroes, not farmers.

The pony's practical wisdom, combined with her vicious business acumen and the overwhelming politics of the region, made for strange bed fellows. She often found herself invited to soirees and dinners where she was wooed by those with money and power. She was, of course, not interested in the gifts offered by ponies with silver tongues and black hearts. Still, she turned the meetings to her advantage, and helped her family's farm proposer behind all expectation. Her family became wealthy, though not near as wealthy as the Picks.

The Picks were a ruthless bunch of ponies and unicorns that were less related by blood than they were a simple desire for power and wealth. The Picks had started the mines in the first years of the town, and had made a killing supplying the rest of Equestria with gems, minerals, and cut stone. Because of their vast wealth, the Picks had held influence in palace before it had been decimated during the rebellion. Since no pony held the ear of the princess now, the Picks were left to squabble among the others vying for power in Equestria. While largely unsuccessful in Canterlot, the Picks held court over the Bridleburg region, and ushered the area into newfound heights of prosperity through clever deals and shady tradings.

None of this mattered to Heart Chase. She wasn't interested in power, and she wasn't interested the Picks. Her largest concern at the moment was the addition of apple trees to the farms.

Trees were nonexistent in this region with good reason; the soil simply wasn't deep enough to hold them. Still, investment requires innovation, and if Heart Chase was good at anything, it was innovation. After a minor skirmish between the Kin of Luna and the Picks had broken out, she noticed that the unicorns had blasted large craters into the bedrock with their magic. That gave Heart Chase the idea to fill those holes with dirt, and plant apple trees. Certainly they wouldn't grow tall, but they could grow wide, and apples would be a welcome addition to a diet high in carrots and wheat.

Heart Chase was supervising a cavalcade of earth ponies as they shoveled dirt into the craters blasted by the unicorns. The ponies here were part of her extend family. Many had farms elsewhere that had either failed or been

taken over during the revolution. It turned out they liked Bridleburg so much, they decided to stay and live as a commune on Chase Family Farms. Heart Chase was happy to have family surrounding her, though it could get claustrophobic at times.

“Alright!” she yelled to the earth ponies. “Bring down that next load; I wanna see these holes filled before nightfall. Plantin’ season ain’t that far off, and I want these patches of dirt fertilized and ready for spring. We got a hot house full of apple saplings that need to get in the ground before it starts raining.” She spotted an orange earth pony who was watching other ponies do all the heavy lifting. “Carrot Muffin! I see you over there! Pick up your shovel, and get diggin’! Don’t make me come over there, young lady.”

Heart Chase never felt bad about yelling at the ponies; some of the children needed the discipline that came from hard work. She had no children of her own, but she was more than happy to enforce her own work ethic on her extended family. All the ponies were working now, and the tilling was going as planned. Chase walked away from the new fields, and into the barn where lunch was being prepared.

The barn was as typical as you could get: a squat, single story stone building that housed tables and a kitchen. Instead of each family making their own food, Heart Chase had come up with the idea of serving every pony the same thing at the same time. It turned out to be more efficient, and it allowed the extended family time to bond over meals. The mares and stallions who were either too old or unwilling to work the field came together morning, noon, and night to prepare food for the army of ponies that lived and worked on Chase Family Farms. Heart Chase was happy to see that her sister kept things running smoothly in here.

“Apple Chase, how’s lunch coming?” she asked.

“Seriously?” she asked. Apple pulled a pot from the fire. “Every day you ask the same stupid questions: ‘How’s lunch coming? How’s dinner going? How are the fillies?’” The yellow mare dumped the contents of the pot into another bowl, and began stirring. “Don’t you have anything better to do than to boss ponies around?”

“I’m askin’ cause it’s my job, Apple,” said Chase. “Things gotta run smoothly around here; that’s what I do.” Apple huffed and turned away from

her sister.

“What you should be doing is raising a family like the rest of us,” said Apple Chase. “Father would lose his mind if he were still alive. Why if he knew that you prefer the company of...” Heart Chase glared at her sister. The look said in no uncertain terms that if she finished that sentence, Heart Chase would put her head through the wall. “Anyway,” continued Apple Chase, “it’s not like the farm is going to fall apart without your constant care. It’s not Equestria, after all, and you are certainly not Celestia.”

Heart Chase sighed at her sister. There were many things that she didn’t understand and the handling of business was one of them. She didn’t seem to understand that Equestria was falling apart, not because Celestia was gone, but because everypony else that wanted to fill her role was unsuited for the job.

The farm seemed like that in a microcosm. Everypony wanted her job, but they didn’t know how to bargain. They didn’t know how to secure loans, or deal with Bridleburg’s nightmarish banking system. They weren’t prepared to face the onslaught of poisoned kindness that came from the miners and the Picks. The only pony that seemed to understand was her niece, Red Chase.

Red Chase was a bright young mare who had gotten her grandfather’s business sense and her aunt’s training. She studied at the hooves of her Auntie Heart in hopes that to one day surpass Heart in capacity as manager of the farm. Chase only hoped that Red was as clever as she seemed because as it stood, Equestria forced ponies in her position to grow up fast. As if to illustrate the point, Red Chase came running to Heart.

“Aunt Heart,” panted the filly, “there’s a stallion here to see you.” Chase looked down at the young mare and prepared to dispense wisdom to her.

“Red, you go back there and you find out what he wants,” said Chase. “If he’s lookin’ to make a deal, you deal with him. If he’s lookin’ fer a pony, you help him find them. If he’s a traveler, you welcome him in. If he’s lookin’ fer a fight, well, you let the stallions handle him.” Chase tousled her niece’s mane. “You gotta start takin’ responsibility if you wanna run the farm.”

“He’s lookin’ for you,” said Red Chase. “I tried to tell him you were busy, but

he wasn't havin' any of that. It's that old pegasus," said Red. "He started goin' on and on about Celestia before I got away. Darn near talked my ears off." Heart Chase groaned in despair; she knew it was Sound Cloud. She took a deep breath and started for the gates. The day was going to prove to be just as arduous as she had feared. As she walked for the field gates, she admired the job her family had done with the Winter Wrap up.

The grounds had been cleared of winter's snow for the seasons of rain that stood just a few weeks away. The winter this year hadn't been anything to speak of, but with all the fillies and colts that were due this spring a good harvest was essential. More mouths to feed also meant more workers and a new crop of Chases to learn the trades of the farm. It brought a smile to Heart's face to know that life continued no matter what. She totted past the gates and into the presence of Sound Cloud.

Sound Cloud was an interesting pegasus. Certainly he was nothing to look at: a green coat that had grayed around the edges, a blue mane that had done the same, and yellow eyes that had been lined with the years of sorrow and frustration of living in such times. His cutie mark was of a cloud with ripples behind it. He had always said that it was his lot in life to speak, and Sound Cloud was one of those ponies who never stopped talking. Getting him started on any topic was an invitation to waste a few hours of your time no matter what else needed to be done.

Heart Chase walked through the gates of the fields to see the old pegasus talking to several of the fillies and colts that had come out to see him. He was droning on about the miracle of the sun and how we as ponies should pray to Celestia for her return. Sound Cloud turned to see Heart Chase as she came from the fields.

"Oh, my dear Heart Chase!" he said. "It is always such a pleasure to see you. I was walking out of town, for you see at my age, walking is the key to good health, and I passed by your farm. I was thinking about how much I enjoy coming out here every week to teach your fillies and colts about the miracle of the sun rise, and of the great bounty that our goddess gives to us each day. About how we can all pray to her that she return to our lives and..."

"Sound Cloud, what do yah want?" interrupted Heart Chase. "If yah want money, yah ain't gettin' it; I already gave to the church at the beginning of

the month. If yah want a meal, yah can join us fer lunch; there's always plenty to go around." She pushed a lock of her orange hair back behind her bonnet. "And if yer just here to yammer, yah can save it. I ain't got time today, Reverend." The pegasus glared at her with a disapproving eye.

"If your father were alive to hear you speak to your elders like that..."

"Well, he ain't here," said Heart Chase. "I run the farm now. Mah homestead, mah rules. I know you served together durin' the war, but that don't make you Celestia's gift to Chase Family Farms. Yah ain't family, and yah ain't gonna be less you marry in, and I don't see that happenin'." The fillies and colts who had gathered to hear him speak tittered at the remark. Heart Chase turned to them.

"Ain't you got chores to do, youngins?" she demanded. The fillies and colts bolted away from Heart Chase as if she were a manticore. She turned back to Sound Cloud. "Ah like yah just fine, Reverend, but your long winded sermons put me so far behind sometimes I gotta work through the night just to make up for them." She paused a moment. "Now, I ask again, what do yah want?" Sound Cloud sighed, and recomposed himself.

"I'll try to make it quick, since your time is apparently more valuable than mine," huffed Sound Cloud. "Never mind I haven't much time left or that I've been preaching for going on thirty years now. No, I'm sure whatever it is that you're doing is much more important than saving Equestria from the growing hordes of mongrels that threaten it." Heart Chase stared at the preacher. She was unimpressed by his typical martyr routine. "I am assembling a pilgrimage," he continued, "a band of the most devout followers of Celestia to go to her palace in Canterlot and pray that she grace Equestria again with her presence."

"Yah do realize there are literally hundreds of ponies who do that every day, right?" asked Heart Chase. "I've been to Canterlot once. The whole square was filled with them, what do yah call it, zealots? Just bowin' and prayin' over and over again. Kinda creepy, if you ask me." Sound Cloud stomped an aging hoof into the dirt.

"Those damned zealots don't know the first thing of prayer!" shrieked Sound Cloud. "That is not what Celestia wants from ponies at all, and it never has been. Those ponies are only there to assuage the guilt of their

own sins, not bring back the Goddess that we have missed so dearly all these years.” Anger flashed through his yellow eyes and for a moment Heart Chase was concerned he might have a heart attack right then and there. “No, what Celestia wants from us is to love and tolerate each other. She doesn’t want us at war with our neighbors. She doesn’t want use killing each other over petty land disputes. She certainly doesn’t want Equestria falling to pieces around her! We have got to stop it!”

“And how do yah propose we do that?” asked Heart Chase. “I’m a farmer; you’re an old preacher. Together we can do exactly nothin’ fer Equestria but keep our families fed.” She pointed out into Bridleburg. “Why don’t you let ponies like the Picks handle all that big picture nonsense? I ain’t leavin’ this farm and mah family to go one some kinda half baked expedition to Canterlot so we can stare at a bricked up wall.” Heart Chase pulled a flask from her bonnet and took a swig. Arguing with Sound Cloud was always exasperating business, and he was already giving her a headache.

“Can’t you spare any pony?” asked Sound Cloud. “I am but an old pegasus, and I fear that making the journey alone will make me a target for bandits and the Lunar Remnants.”

“I can’t do it,” said Heart Chase. “Plantin’ season is comin’ and I can’t spare the ponies. There’s a bumper crop of foals waitin’ to be born this year, and we need every last hand in the fields to make sure this plantin’ is perfect. I’m sorry, Sound Cloud, but I can’t help yah. I’m sure there are plenty of other ponies in Bridleburg who are willing to travel with yah.”

“I’ve posted notices at the taverns and inns looking for help,” said Sound Cloud. “If you change your mind...”

“I’m not gonna,” said Heart Chase. “Now come on in and have lunch, yah old fool. I’ll even let yah say grace.”

They walked together along the dirt paths of the farm toward the barn kitchen. The smells of breads and fruits filled the country air with the tastes of a good old fashioned family feast. Of course, nearly every meal here was a feast by necessity. The addition of one more guest wouldn’t matter, nor several, as it turned out. As the ponies approached the barn, Red Chase was greeting two other ponies who had stopped by the farm on business. Their flanks were adorned with picks and quills.

“Good afternoon,” said Heart Chase. “What can I do fer the Picks today?”

“Ah, Miss Heart Chase,” said the blue earth pony. “We are here this afternoon at the behest of Count Iron Pick to extend to you an invitation to dinner tomorrow evening.” Heart Chase looked from one pony to the other. Between the two ponies, there didn’t seem like there was an ounce of decent hard work between them and she fantasized briefly about putting them under the yoke for her own amusement. She snapped back to the topic at hand

“Come again?” she asked. “Dinner? With Count Iron Pick?”

“Well that sounds fantastic,” said Sound Cloud. “I’ll be sure to wear my finest robes to deliver the blessings of Celestia for the meal. Have I ever told you of the time I met her highness? You would be amazed at how beautiful she is in person, I assure you.” The two Pick ponies turned to each other with a look of distress.

“Uh, Reverend?” asked Heart Chase. “Why don’t yah go gather up every pony for grace while I entertain my guests here?”

“Fantastic idea,” said Sound Cloud. He trotted over to gather up the ponies for prayer. Heart Chase turned back to her other guests.

“Well I never,” said the blue unicorn. “A stallion of the cloth should know better than to just invite himself to such events.”

“Don't go getting yer collars in a twist,” said Heart Chase. “The Reverend might be long winded but he's a great pony to have at dinners. You can always sic him on other talkers and let them duke it out.” She took off her bonnet and let the braided hair drop down her shoulders. “At any rate, I thank yah kindly fer the invitation. If there's nothin else, I'd like to invite yah folks to lunch.”

“Actually,” said the earth pony, “there were several other things we needed to discuss with you. Privately, if you please.” Heart Chase looked at the two ponies with suspicion. She had no reason to distrust them, but the need for secrecy worried her more than she was willing to let on. She gestured for them to follow.

The sounds of the reverend's prayer echoed in the background as the trio walked away from the barn. They pushed against the tide of ponies coming in for lunch, and made their way into a small room in the basement of the stone house across the way from the barn. As they walked down the stairs, the earth pony shut the door behind him and began closing the windows. With the windows closed, the basement office became dark. The unicorn set a spark with his horn and lit the candles along the wall. Heart Chase walked behind her desk, awaiting some sort of explanation.

"You may be asking yourself why we're being so secretive," said the unicorn.

"That's not what I'm askin' myself right, now," said Heart Chase. "I'm askin' myself why yah haven't introduced yerselves yet." The ponies exchanged a sideways glance before they continued.

"I am Silk Pick," said the blue unicorn.

"And I am Quill Pick," said the blue earth pony. "We have come here today as emissaries to our father, Count Iron Pick."

"And what, besides dinner, does the Count want with me?" asked Heart Chase. She could already guess the direction this conversation was going to take.

"He wishes to unite the Chase family and the Pick family together at their heads," said Silk Pick. "He has plans of proposing to you tomorrow at dinner. It would be most embarrassing if you were to refuse, which is why we are here to discuss the matter before hand." Heart Chase wasn't in the least bit surprised at the revelation and the look of disdain on her face must have been obvious to the two ponies.

"I understand if this all seems a bit sudden," said Quill Pick. "But the time has come for the Bridleburg region to spread its wings and become the power that is meant to be. We have everything here: water ways for trade, bountiful soil, minerals galore. The fact that we were passed over as the new capital city is a travesty of justice."

"That's real idealistic of yah," said Heart Chase, "but what in the name of

Celestia does that got to do with me marryin' yer dad? Fer one, we ain't even close in age. He was Pa's commandin' officer after all. Fer two, I've only ever met him three or four times, so I don't know him." She scratched her mane with a hoof trying to come up with other reasons why she shouldn't marry Iron Pick. "Three, there's you two to contend with. I know he's probably lonely and all after losin' yer mom, but he's already got his heirs. He doesn't need a mare like me to keep him company."

"Your reasons are all valid, Miss Chase," said Silk Pick. "You are correct in your assessments, but this is not a marriage of love or companionship we're talking about here."

"This is a political marriage," said Quill Pick. "With the two most powerful families in the region united, others will flock to our flag. We will become the legitimate rulers of the Bridleburg region, and not be subject to the wills and whims of our absent empress." Heart Chase put up her hooves in protest.

"Yer talkin' treason here," said Heart Chase. "Celestia is still our princess, and yer daddy would do well to remember that she aint' gonna be gone forever."

"How long are you going to pray to a goddess you no longer know even exists?" asked Silk Pick. "How long do you think the ponies of Bridleburg can stand divided against those who seek power by force? Do you think those damned Lunar Rebels just disappeared? Mark my words, Miss Chase: without Celestia, another civil war is coming. With our families combined, we could become rulers of this region. Would you not want to be a queen, Miss Chase?"

Heart Chase thought about it for a moment. Queen Heart Chase had an excellent ring to it, and it would mean a great deal more land and power for the Chase family. With the support of the ponies not just at the farm, but those in the surrounding regions, combined with the Pick families already vast wealth and numbers would mean a real standing army, and a very real chance of success at such a bold plan.

Still, there was the matter of what to do if Celestia came out of her self-imposed exile, and what would happen to the fledgling nation of Bridleburg if she did. That might be a problem for another generation though. Heart

Chase needed time to think.

"I'll have to think about it," she said. "There's a lot to consider here. We're talking about starting a nation here. Canterlot's going to be none too pleased because I'm guessin' we're not the only region thinkin' of such a thing. Stalliongrad's gotta be thinkin' the same thing. Do we ally with them?"

"Then we'll expect you at dinner tomorrow evening," said Quill Pick. "We'll relay your concerns to our father, and delay the engagement until the details are hammered out. We would appreciate your... discretion in this matter."

Heart Chase nodded. It was treason she was talking about, but it was for the benefit of all of Bridleburg, and most of all, an opportunity to give the Chase family the prosperity it deserved. If the Chases and the Picks became one family, they could work together to become an unstoppable power that could take the Bridleburg region as their own. Rather than fighting and feuding for power, the two families would become royalty instead of rivals.

Chapter 2

How It All Ends

To those who didn't know, the whirlwind romance between Heart Chase and Iron Pick seemed like something out of a fairy tale. They met one night at a fancy dinner party, fell madly in love, and were to be married in the fall. For months, all the town of Bridleburg could talk about was the love that had blossomed between the two ponies, and how the union of the two most powerful families in the region would be nothing but a boon. Congratulations poured in from all corners of Equestria on their impending marriage, and political deals were struck long before vows were ever made.

For those who did know, the reality of the situation was far less fairy tale, and far more horror story. The two ponies knew at once that any relationship between them would be a farce: Heart Chase preferred the company of mares, and Iron Pick was a curmudgeon who had few interests in any pony but his family. Still, they were both family ponies at heart, and they knew that their union, despite being a lie, would bring both of their families the prosperity they deserved. They could agree to disagree on most things, and spend as little time together as was publicly acceptable.

The planning of the ceremony had become a boondoggle all its own. Heart Chase found herself talking with ponies that had jobs she hadn't known existed. Florists and planners and servants of the Pick house would ask her questions she simply had no idea how to answer. Calligraphers and scribes would ask about invitations and things Heart Chase had never even remotely cared about. She was happy that Red Chase was by her side to help deal with some of this nightmare that her life had become.

Red had taken to the upper crust lifestyle with the same practical efficiency she approached business of the farm. She quickly became accustomed to the ways of the city ponies, and found herself thrust into the plans and dealings of the ruling class. The filly had even garnered herself the attentions of a Quill for her shrewd dealings with the silver tongued snakes that resided at the top of the political heap. Despite their age difference, a fast friendship had emerged between them, and both Iron Pick and Heart

Chase found themselves wishing that they could put those two together rather than themselves.

Still, the politics of the region dictated that there was no escaping their union. They were to be married, and the bond forged between them would unite the Bridleburg Valley into its own state. Everypony in the valley stood to benefit from the declaration, but Canterlot would not let them go peacefully. Already an army was being raised to fight the inevitable civil war. Canterlot's tattered forces would attempt to move into the area and restore their Equestrian rule. Bridleburg, rich in pony power and resources, would easily crush the forces, and start their own sovereignty. And it all started with this wedding.

Heart Chase stood and stared into the mirror before her. She hadn't ever expected to see herself in the whites of a bride, but it looked good on her. Her orange mane had been braided and adorned with white flowers, then wrapped in a crown of hair around her head. New sandals made from polished steel adorned her yellow fetlocks, and a veil of finest gossamer hung before her blue eyes. Today was the day it all happened. Today was the day she became a traitor to Equestria, and a hero to those who would be her subjects. She looked back at her bridal party with a concerned glance. Red Chase was there, as was Apple Chase, both wearing the subtle pink of a bridesmaid.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" asked Apple Chase. "I know you don't love him, and that you're doing this so we can all live better. I know you're doing the right thing, but you're putting yourself in terrible danger." She looked around with an apprehensive glance. "I've heard that war will come to us if we secede from Equestria and that our biggest threat won't be Celestia's knights, but the Lunar Republic."

"That's not for yah to worry about," said Heart Chase. She nuzzled her sister with a smile. "Yer job is to take care of your children, run the farm, and keep every pony happy as best yah can. Yah let me handle the big picture, Apple. I'll take care of us all, just like I promised Daddy."

"I certainly hope so," said Apple Chase. "I never thought that I'd see you married, let alone to a Pick."

"It's a sham, and you know it," said Red Chase. Her pretty red mane had

been done up in a bouffant that irritated the young mare to no end. "Quill and I can just get married. That'll solve everything, and you won't have to crawl in bed with that old stallion. I don't mind Quill, he's a real nice pony. I might even grow to love him some day." Heart Chase had to snicker at her niece. She put a hoof around Red's shoulder.

"You go ahead and do that if you still feel that way next year," said Heart Chase. "But this is what needs to be done here and now to assert our independence from Equestria. Iron Pick isn't a young stallion and his line of succession goes right through Quill. If that's what you want, then you'll make a wonderful queen someday." Heart Chase kissed her niece's cheek with a smile. "But it's on my shoulders to be start this revolution, my dear Red. You'll just have to wait your turn." Music floated in through the open windows to signal the start of the wedding. Heart Chase looked out of the rectory and toward the chapel. It was now or never.

Along the shores of the Dame River, the preparations continued for the reception. Tents had been set up to house the hundreds of guests that were arriving from all of Equestria, and tables had been lined with the bounty of harvest from the year. Dozens of members of both the Pick and Chase families worked together to ensure the arriving guests from both near and far would have the spectacular food and accommodations they had come to expect.

Ponies had begun to arrive earlier in the day from as far as Stalliongrad bearing gifts and tiding of joy from their far away locales. Others were coming in from far less distant places, though their journey had been hampered by the creeping progression of the Everfree Forest. Still, the mood at the reception festival was that of peace and joy. Though the undercurrent of worry was still present, ponies were willing to put aside their feelings of unease to celebrate the union of two ponies who would bring to each other a life of joy and completion.

Back at the chapel, Heart Chase, flanked by her sister and niece, walked toward the chapel amidst the melodic chords of the pipe organ. It was a beautiful day for a fall wedding; the last hints of summer heat nipped at the heels of autumn chill. Celestia's sun shone in the sky as if to offer it's blessings to the union of two families, though Heart Chase was sure that did not.

As Apple Chase and Red Chase sauntered up the aisle toward the altar, Heart thought she heard what sounded like the clanking of metal scales. Metal scales on chain. She perked her head up and looked around. None of the stallions that stood guard at the entrance seemed to have heard it. It might have just been a figment of her imagination. Heart Chase had to chuckle to herself. Here she was, so worked up about her wedding that she was hearing ghosts. Familiar chords began blaring from the pipe organ, signaling to Heart Chase that it was time to make her own journey down the aisle. She took a deep breath, and stepped into the chapel.

The chapel was a magnificent fusion of form and style that Bridleburg construction had become famous for. Carved from solid sheets of limestone, the walls towered two stories into the air and inlaid on the stone were filigree edgings that spiraled up the walls to the edges of the ceiling. The ceiling itself was half covered in a fresco of Celestia raising the sun while the other half was conspicuously blank. Dustings of purple plaster hinted at what may have once been there. Stained glass windows that depicted ponies working in the mines and fields lit the chapel as the morning sun rose over Bridleburg Valley and the far wall was covered in a stained glass rendition of Celestia raising the sun as ponies bowed before her.

Heart Chase found it ironic that a ceremony that was such an insult to the Princess's reign should be held in such a place that glorified her name and visage. It almost made her reconsider the whole thing, until she reminded herself that this was all for the greater good. Everypony would benefit, including herself. She came at last to the altar where Iron Pick stood waiting for her.

Iron Pick was an imposing unicorn, and not just physically. He stood nearly a full head taller than Heart Chase, and though his charcoal coat had grayed around the edges, he stood in command of the entire room without saying a word. His grey mane fell around his horn in a short styling the meant business, and the unadorned pick on his flank was a symbol of his pure power. He was clearly not a pony to be trifled with.

In front of the two ponies stood Sound Cloud. As the pastor of this cathedral, he was obligated, despite his protests, to conduct the ceremony. He only hoped that his worst fears were unfounded and that the union of these two unlikely ponies was the product of true love and admiration

rather than some shady political dealing. He briefly remembered a conversation shared with a traveling monk about the union, and how the monk had assured him that such a relationship wouldn't last. Since Sound Cloud was the only pony in Bridleburg able to grant a divorce, they were stuck with each other whether they loved each other or not.

"Dearly beloved," began Sound Cloud. "We are gathered here today in the sight of our princess and goddess Celestia to request these two ponies be joined in the sacred and unbreakable vows of matrimony. Take not this journey lightly, ponies, for what Celestia may put together, no pony but Death shall tear apart."

The ceremony and homily continued in the same heavy hoofed style for nearly an hour. It wasn't that Sound Cloud truly believed that the marriage of these two ponies was the harbinger of destruction for the kingdom; he had always preached that way. Still, by the time the service had wrapped up, every pony in attendance was desperate for a drink. As they got into their carriage, Heart Chase was kind enough to share the flask concealed in her garter with her new husband.

"Well that was certainly an interesting hour," said Iron Pick, as he took a swig from the flask. "I don't seem to remember the last wedding being quite that preachy."

"Well, you know ol' Sound Cloud," said Heart Chase. "Can't help but hear himself talk." She put her head out the window to breathe deep the crisp fall air. The scent of leaves and sap filled the perfect day with cheer of harvest that was soon to come.

The sounds of the carriage were drowned out the noise of celebration as it drove through the city of Bridleburg. Throngs of ponies threw rice and flowers at the couple as they passed. Ponies of all stripes cheered the new couple, and the dawning of a new era for the region. Ponies in armor stood at every corner to clear the way for the carriage, and already ponies were beginning to bow. The reality of it all began to sink in as they crested the hill overlooking Chase Family Farms.

In the valley below was a city of tents. A massive tent had been erected in the southern field to house the festivities; clearly the barn kitchen wasn't going to cut it for the hundreds of guests. Surrounding it were other tents

made for drinking, relaxing, reception, and whatever else it was that one did at a wedding of this magnitude. Heart Chase was a bit flummoxed at the size of it all, and found a small part of her wishing that this entire wedding hadn't just been a scheme to better the lives of every pony in the region.

The carriage came to a halt outside of a small white tent. The driver opened the door for the newlyweds, and ushered them to the booth where a unicorn wearing a smock awaited them. The unicorn arranged the couple a moment before he levitated a piece of charcoal.

"Perfect!" he announced. "Please hold still, this will take a few moments."

Ten minutes later, the sketch of the couple had been completed, and they were allowed to relax. With great flourish he began to paint, pausing occasionally to gaze out at the happy couple. Only they didn't seem too happy; they seemed nervous. Wedding night jitters, perhaps? The unicorn chuckled to himself. A nervous couple on their wedding day was always the sure sign of a happy marriage in the making. The artist finished his portrait in the span of an hour, and presented it to the new couple with a bow.

"For you, Mr. and Mrs. Pick," he said. "May it hang in your home for years to come."

The two ponies left the tent under the escort of several armored stallions. They had been nervous earlier as they both heard the rustle of metal scales on the wind. Despite Iron Pick's age, his senses were still sharp enough to pick out a threat from a mile away, and there was definitely trouble afoot. Still, it was to be a happy occasion, and there was no reason to cause panic among the guests. Pick set his ponies out to patrol the edges of the festivities, and to raise alarm should they find anything.

By this time, the afternoon of cheer had faded into an evening of celebration. It seemed as if a thousand ponies had gathered here on the Chase Family Farms to congratulate the happy couple. Many were there simply to deliver well wishes, while others were there simply to be seen at the social event of the year. Heart Chase barely recognized most of them, and inexplicably wished to be back in the fields. She looked at her steel clad hooves and realized that she was in her fields.

This was her life now. No more digging; no more planting. There were politics to be played for the betterment of all those who were willing to work for it. As the sun set on the reception, so rose the moon of the new regime. It would take months to draft the papers, to play the politics, and truly become that which the ponies had come to expect of her, but it all started here. Heart Chase looked to the rising moon and smiled as she and Iron Pick walked toward into the grand tent. Spread before them were the happy faces of family and friends, dignitaries and diplomats, all eager to applaud the dawn of a new era. Sound Cloud stepped forward ahead of the couple, and cleared his throat.

“Announcing for the first time,” called Sound Cloud, “Mr and Mrs. Iron Pick.” The ground rumbled with the thundering stomps of a hundred approving ponies as cheers and well wishes sprang forth from the gathered crowd. Iron Pick and Heart Chase could only smile as they moved toward their tables. Quill, Silk, Apple, and Red were already awaiting them. The brothers greeted their father with a bow and their new stepmother with a kiss on the cheek. They sat at last to enjoy the meal that the families had prepared for them.

Dinner itself was filled with the joyous conversation and the thoughts of the romance that had blossomed between the happy couple. The clanging of horns of glasses forced the two to kiss far more often than they would have liked, but they were here to give to the dignitaries and their families a reason to celebrate. The true political posturing would come after the honeymoon.

In the Dame River, a ship awaited to take the happy couple to out to sea and around the coast to the lands of the zebras. There, they were to meet with others who would begin the revolution, and scatter the already tattered remnants of the Canterlot forces. Within the year, Stalliongrad, Bridleburg, and Equestria would all be their separate countries with their own separate destinies. It was a brave new world out there; they simply had to make it through the night to be the catalyst that the world needed to change. But lurking in the shadows were those who sought an entirely different change.

Just up the river, a barge floated toward the reception in darkened silence. A hundred soldiers were aboard, earth pony, pegasus, and unicorn alike, all dressed in the blue leather plates of the Lunar Rebellion. There was no discussion, no prayers for battle; only the grim silence of focus. As the

barge rounded a bend in the river, the unicorn standing atop the bow waved his horn, and filled the river banks with a fog. A pony cloaked in the shadows of evening saw the signal and ordered his score of troops forward.

In the fields outside the reception lie the bodies of the guards that had gone out to investigate the noises that Iron Pick and Heart Chase had heard. Their armor had been stripped and taken as disguise from the creeping forces of the Lunar Rebels while their bodies were left to rot in the fields of wheat beyond. Now, as the evening of celebration wore on and the free flowing wine clouded the judgment of every pony, the forces of opposition placed themselves among the crowd, and waited for a signal. Those in the tent had only vaguely been aware that guards had moved up to surround them; they were instead focused on the speech of Quill.

“And finally to Heart Chase,” said Quill. “I don’t know you as well as I should and I’m sorry for that. I’m glad to have met you, and I believe that this marriage is the herald of a great new era for our families. I’m proud to call you my step-mother, and I welcome to chance for us to grow as family and as friends.” The audience stamped their feet, and filled the tent with applause. Heart Chase walked over to Quill, and hugged her step-son.

“Thank you, Quill,” she said. “I glad that you’re family now.” She hugged Silk as well, and kissed both their cheeks.

“And now,” announced Iron Pick, “If my wonderful wife will join me for our first dance?” Heart Chase trotted from the platform to meet her husband on the soft earth floor of the tent. They stood face to face as the band behind them struck up a slow waltz.

A dance between ponies was always a thing to behold and the dance between two lovers even more so. Quill Pick and Heart Chase were both excellent dancers and they moved with the grace of the winds as they waltzed around the dance floor. They stepped together in perfect harmony, as if they were made to be together. It made Heart Chase sad that she could never love Iron Pick the way he deserved. He may have been gruff and seemingly cold hearted, but underneath it all was a soul that wanted the best for his family. In that way, Heart Chase and Iron Pick were perfect for each other. Were they closer in age, or indeed even if Heart Chase could give her love to a stallion, this wedding would have been more than a

show. It would have been real love. Iron Pick stepped forwards a moment and whispered into his wife's ear.

"We're going to be attacked," he said. As if one of the false guards saw him whisper, the tent descended into chaos.

Explosions rocked the tent as the false guards struck first with magic. The tent began to burn as one of the earth ponies took torch to the fabric and in a moment, the tent became a wall of flame. Iron Pick dashed in front of Heart Chase and shot a bolt of magic from his horn that blasted aside the false guard ponies from the exit. Quill and Silk were at their father's side in a second, ready to defend.

"Get Red and Apple!" demanded Iron Pick. "Meet us at the ship. Let no one stand in your way!" Heart Chase and Iron Pick dashed for the opening made by Iron's magic as the tent burned around them. Outside the main tent, fires burned throughout the farm and from the river came the charging herd of soldiers clad in the night blue armor of the Lunar Rebellion. Heart Chase's eyes went wide with shock.

The field had become a slaughterhouse. Ponies lay in the dirt, killed by the magic and bladed hooves of the army that advanced on them. Some guests struggled valiantly with the creeping army, but found themselves stabbed in the back by those ponies who were supposed to be protecting them.

Iron Pick and Heart Chase galloped through the fields and over the bodies of their friends and relatives. There was no time to mourn their loss; now there was only survival. Iron Pick blasted his way through a group of soldiers with another explosive spell when a face among the soldiers caught his eye.

Standing at the rear of the herd of soldiers was a towering stallion of sky blue. His white mane had been cropped close, and his body was covered in steel blue plates of the Lunar Rebellion. Emblazoned upon the rear of his armor was a pole axe. The stallion turned to stare directly at Iron Pick.

Iron Pick nearly froze in terror. How that pony managed to survive the Rebellion was a question best left unanswered. He shook off his fear and turned to see Quill, Silk, Red, and Apple charging through the line toward

the boat. He slowed to let them catch up.

“Dear goddess, get them out of here,” said Iron Pick. “There is no saving our family now; Death has come to us, and his name is Glaive.” As if his name were taboo, the stallion turned to face the herd of fleeing ponies. He simply nodded, and charged for them.

With the squad of ten armored stallions bearing down on them, the bridal party doubled their speed. The closer they came to the boat, the closer the chasing squad closed on them. Iron Pick turned and lobbed a bolt of magic at the onrushing squad. The horn of a Glaive flared and captured the bolt in a slow spin around his horn. The bolt of magic flared with a massive light and fired back at Iron Pick.

The bolt of magic struck the ground in front of Iron Pick, and hurled the bridal party through the air. Most of them landed in the river; Heart Chase crashed through the deck of the ship. From his vantage in the sky, Iron Pick saw where every pony landed and prayed they would be safe.

He fell to the ground with a sickening crunch of bone before the onrushing stallions. They slowed to a halt and encircled the broken pony. Glaive stepped forward with a grin. His smile was filled with pointed teeth.

“You didn’t send me an invitation, old friend,” said Glaive. He kicked Iron Pick in the stomach. The charcoal unicorn could only gag and sputter. “I helped you get where you are today and you didn’t even think to invite me to your wedding? Without me, you’d have just been part of the nameless rabble of the war. Bad form, Commander Pick. Bad form.” Several of the other armored stallions dragged Iron to his feet so that Glaive could look his ‘friend’ in the eyes. “You think that just because the Rebellion failed that we disappeared? You’re not as dumb as that, Commander. You could have come to me; I would have supported your bid for royalty.”

“I would sooner die than have a traitor like you by my side,” spat Iron Pick.

“Oh, but you too are a traitor,” said Glaive. “I saw through your plan; every pony in Canterlot did. Not very clever marrying a girl like her. You just couldn’t make it less obvious could you? Had to go for the spectacle; had to have everything now. You always were a brash pony.” Glaive chuckled and waved over another pony. “The forces of Celestia are coming here now to

put an end to your little coup. It would be a shame were they to simply march through unopposed. I want you to be alive to witness the magnitude of your failure. Your pretty wife, well, maybe not so much.” Glaive pointed his horn at the boat and fired a blast at the mooring lines. The side of the ship caught fire as it pin wheeled downstream.

The pony that Glaive had gestured to came forth. His coat was white, but spattered with blood. In his mane were tangled the instruments of a doctor, but with him, they looked to be horrible implements of torture. The maniacal grin plastered across his face said more about the pony’s mental health than any pony would care to admit.

“Bonestitch,” said Glaive. “See that Iron Pick is well taken care of. He will be useful to me shortly.” Glaive stopped, and looked out onto the slaughter that had beset the field. An idea struck him, one that required Iron Pick be alive and well. “Shadow Box, call back our forces.”

“Sir?” asked the dark coated earth pony. Glaive turned to his lieutenant and smiled with his pointed teeth.

“The Lunar Republic shall rise after all,” said Glaive, “and with it, the return of our queen. Hail Nightmare Moon, children of the night. Today begins a new era, and we have Iron Pick to thank for it.”

Chapter 3

Out to Sea

It was the rhythmic pounding of waves on the side of the boat that finally awoke Heart Chase. She opened her eyes to discover the interior of a ship. How she had gotten here was a mystery, though the hole in the ceiling was a decent clue. The last thing she remembered was running for the ship, Iron Pick turned to defend and...

Oh goddess, she thought, where are Red and Apple?

Heart Chase pushed herself to her feet and stumbled out of the door. The beauty of open water was spread before her in a blanket of shimmering night. Rain showered the vessel and the surrounding ocean with its blessings and filled the sea air with the spray of salt. There was only a gentle breeze that bobbed the ship in the open water.

The boat was empty and the rear of it had been scorched by fire. Heart Chase stared out at the open water with a sickening realization. Everything had gone wrong. She hadn't seen what happened to her sister and niece or her new step sons. She didn't even know what had happened to her husband. She was simply here, wherever here might be. In the middle of open water. Churning. Rocking. Bobbing.

Heart Chase dashed to the side of the ship and immediately threw up everything she had eaten at the wedding. She had never been on a ship before and the churning beneath her feet combined with a head injury was making her completely nauseated. Heart Chase tried to steady herself and think of a course of action. She needed to take stock. She had herself. Sure, she was a bit dizzy, a bit sea sick, and a bit banged up, but she was otherwise unharmed and ready for action. She had the vessel, though that too was banged up. She looked up to the sky and thanked Celestia for the rain. It had probably saved her ship. Did she have food? Maps? A way to steer this boat? Could she figure out how to use any of it? She looked back to the room she had landed in. That was as good a place to start as any.

The cabin she had crashed through was the quarters that she and Iron Pick were supposed to share. Her bags had been brought aboard earlier that day, so she at least had a few bits and a few changes of clothes. Clothes.

Heart Chase looked at her tattered wedding dress. The lace edges had been scorched by the blast and blood stained the white fabric where splinters had pierced her coat. The dress was ruined. Such a pity too; it had been so beautiful. Her mane had been scorched as well, and her flowers were long gone. At least she still had her shoes. Heart Chase had to give the situation a defeated laugh. Here she was, adrift in the ocean, and she was worried about how her mane looked. She tore off the dress and tossed it aside.

She found other things: ledgers, letters of introduction, some bits and gems. It was all mostly paperwork, scrolls, and materials for making more scrolls. There was nothing here that would help her in her current predicament. She set the bits and gems aside on a table.

Heart Chase walked back across the deck to the... front of the boat? Starboard? Was that what it was called? She cursed herself for never having learned anything about the operations of a boat until she remembered that she had never expected to set sail in her life. Never mind that she was alone on a ship that she had no idea how to operate; who could have seen that coming? She opened the door to the front cabin and found what she was looking for.

Maps. Charts. A globe. A spy glass. A really fancy thing made of metal and glass that she knew had a name, but had no idea what it was. A foggy stone that started glowing as soon as she picked it up. The only thing that was missing was a book on sailing and, quite frankly, that was the only thing she actually needed at the moment. She glared at the captain's quarter's for a second before spotting an oil cloth cloak. She tossed it over her head and shoulders before heading back out into the rain. There was no time like the present to start learning a new skill.

...

It had been a week since the ship carrying Ridgeline home had been hit by pirates. For a week, he had fought with, bit, kicked, and on one occasion, killed any creature who had come close to his cell. He wasn't a clever pony,

but if he was anything, he was a warrior. And he would not be held much longer. He again bucked and kicked at his cell door. The buck rocked the boat.

“Will you knock it off?” asked the pony in the cell beside him. The sky blue unicorn looked up at his fellow prisoner.

“I am a Knight of Celestia,” said the copper coated stallion. “It is my life to serve her, and to defeat the enemies of our goddess.”

“Your goddess,” corrected the unicorn. Ridgeline put his face through the bars and tried to bite at the unicorn.

“Luna is a traitor to Equestria!” boomed Ridgeline. “You Lunar Rebels should be burned at the stake for your crimes!”

“I left that life when they started enslaving other equines!” shot back the other pony. “I freed those who were enslaved. I sought to defeat Nightmare Moon the same as you, you pompous jack hole!” He brought a hoof down on the muzzle of Ridgeline with a loud thump. It didn’t even phase the massive equine, and it hurt his hoof. Bard shook his forelock. “My goddess that stings; is your head made of rocks?”

“Better my head is filled with rocks than filled with lies,” said Ridgeline.

“So that’s a yes,” said Bard. Ridgeline ignored the pony, and kicked the bars again. A crimson coated boar walked down the stairs. He was holding a spear between his tusks.

“I swear, if you kick those bars again, I will run you through,” he said. “Why can’t you just settle down and wait to be ransomed back like your friend over there?”

“That swine is not my friend,” said Ridgeline. “He is an enemy and a traitor, just as all of you are. When I get free...”

“Ah, shut up,” said the boar. He walked back up the stairs. Ridgeline sat defeated in his cell; Bard walked back to the bars separating the two ponies.

“Another game of Tic-Tac-Toe?” he asked. With a weary sigh, Ridgeline scratched an X into the floor next to Ridgeline’s bars. Bard looked down at the grid. “Good opener.”

Above deck, creatures of all stripes worked the rigging. They sang sea shanties about mer-ponies, and told the same bawdy jokes they had all heard a hundred times before. Given the light breeze and the light rain, the sails were still at full rigging as they headed north for the mouth of the Dame River and the infamous pirate haven of Hackney Cove. There they would ransom off their prisoners, or sell them into slavery. Really, whoever offered the better price would get the two; they were too much trouble to try to sell apart.

Captain Einhorn stood above the band of pirates who worked the decks. Like most pirate crews, it was quite the assortment: a griffon staffed the crow’s nests, earth ponies crewed the ballista, and Hamites hauled line. The Hamites, fearsome pig warriors from the jungles near Stalliongrad, were treated as equals aboard *Flotsam*, as were all non-pony crew. Einhorn himself was a massive white stag who had lost an antler in the years past. Aboard his ship, every crew member was considered equally worthless scum. He stood glaring at his crew as his consort, a rose colored pegasus, covered them both with a parasol.

“Oh, Captain,” she cooed. “I do love this weather.”

“Shut it, Constance” barked Einhorn. “I’m not paying you for your wit.” Constance frowned at the captain. Two weeks without a decent haul had left him in a funk that not even her salacious ways could break. Since her continued employment, and in fact, her well being, were directly tied to the happiness of the captain, she opted for a different approach.

“Why not bring the prisoners on deck?” she asked. “Make them fight it out a bit for the amusement of the crew? If one kills the other, that’s one less mouth to feed.” The stag turned to his consort.

“Are you insane?” asked Einhorn. “That Knight of Celestia is worth a fortune to the right buyer, and he’ll easily slaughter that idiot Kin of Luna.”

“So?” said Constance. “He’s a mouthy pain in the flank who has not only insulted everyone who has been down there, but has also managed to start

vicious rumors about your mother. I was most impressed by how he rhymed 'glistening shore' with 'massive whore.'"

"Did I not forbid the mention that song?" snarled Einhorn. "And may I remind you of your chosen profession, Constance?" Constance put on her pouty face.

"It'll do the crew some good to see him get his comeuppance," said the pegasus. "Imagine the look on his face when that Knight puts a hoof through it." Einhorn had to laugh at the thought, and he hadn't had a good laugh in weeks.

The prisoners were brought to the deck amid the jeers and taunts from the crew. A brave boar had managed to clamp manacles on the two ponies and several other crew armed with spears ushered them up to the main deck. Einhorn stood on the forecastle above the two manacled ponies and the hooting crew of pirates. He raised his hooves for silence, and the crew fell quiet.

"My little ponies," Einhorn announced. "You are warriors by heart, not prisoners."

"I'm not technically a soldier," Bard said. One of the Hamites kicked him in the ribs for speaking while the captain was addressing the crew.

"I grow weary of your constant bickering, Bard," continued the stag, "and I grow tired of your violence against my crew, Ridgeline. This ends today. You two are to fight to the death, here and now. The winner may join my crew, or they may choose to return to their cage." Bard and Ridgeline looked at each other with an unsure glance. "Your manacles will be released when one of you is dead. May our dear lord Cervidae have mercy on your pathetic souls." With that, the crew cheered and surrounded the two ponies in a circle around deck.

Ridgeline looked with apprehension at Bard. It wasn't a half an hour ago that he was threatening to kill him, but now with the prospect of actually murdering the unicorn in cold blood, he balked. It was enough of a distraction for Bard to start casting a spell.

This is Bard. I am speaking to you in your mind now, said a voice inside

Ridgeline's head. *If we work together, we can get off this ship. Now take a swing at me.* Ridgeline paused a moment before throwing a massive left hoof at the unicorn. *Good, now keep at it. Can you swim? Don't speak, I can read your thoughts.* The copper coated earth pony shook his head as if he were brushing off a fly. He bit at Bard; the unicorn easily dodged the swinging teeth.

The crew behind them cheered as the two ponies fainted then attacked. Because they were manacled together, the much larger and far stronger Ridgeline controlled the fight. The earth pony dragged the unicorn across the deck by the forelock as Bard kept ahead of the raining blows by mere inches. His own ineffective attacks were simply shrugged off by the powerful Knight, just as expected. Bard was doing his best to keep the crowd entertained as he thought of a plan to whisper into Ridgeline's head.

Constance looked down on the spectacle with regret. She hadn't wanted them to kill each other; just wanted to see Bard get slapped around a bit. Constance looked to the captain. When she saw the bloodlust in his eyes as the ponies circled each other, she thought perhaps, when they got to port, she wouldn't continue her contract with him. She looked away from the blood sport for a moment when she thought she spotted another vessel in the fog. Constance stepped back from the captain. He was far too engrossed in the fight to notice his consort had just flown off the forecastle.

The fog seemed to thicken more as Constance approached the other ship. It was almost as if something was obscuring it on purpose. She landed on the deck of the single masted ship with a gentle thump. The oil cloaked pony on deck turned from her tangle of rigging with a start.

"Who are yah?" asked Heart Chase. The yellow earth pony looked at the pegasus for a moment. She wore gold bangles in her ears and her auburn mane was tied in braids beneath a bandana. Her cutie mark was that of a broken heart. Heart Chase dropped into a defensive stance. "Oh damn it, yer a pirate scout aren't yah?"

"Well, not really," said Constance. "Let's just say I've decided to terminate my contract early." Constance looked around the ship a moment. "Where's your crew?"

"I don't have one," said Heart Chase. "I ain't even sure how I wound up on

this ship, and I don't know to steer it. Yah know anything about sailing?" Constance shrugged her shoulders.

"I know enough that you need more than two ponies to pilot a vessel of this size," said Constance. There was a loud splash off to port followed by yelling. The fog had thickened so much in the past five minutes that Heart Chase couldn't see what it was. "That would probably be the *Flotsam* throwing poor Bard's body overboard. Pity; he was such a lithe young stallion." Heart Chase regarded the pegasus with a wary eye.

"So, yer telling me there's another ship close enough that they can hear us?" whispered Heart Chase.

"Oh yes," said Constance. "Pirates; I'd steer away from them if I were you." Heart Chase stared with a dumbfounded expression at the pegasus for a moment. "You have no idea how to do that, do you?"

"If yah wanna stay on this ship and away from them," said Heart Chase. "I'd suggest yah start by givin' me a helpin' hoof."

Constance, while not a sailor by trade, had spent enough time aboard ships to direct Heart Chase in how to draw up the sail, and steer away from the *Flotsam*. As Constance worked the wheel, Heart Chase struggled with the rigging. A loud thud, followed by cursing broke their concentration.

"There's another ship out here?" said a voice. "Hold onto it!"

"I can't!" bellowed another.

"Damn it so much." There was a burst of dark light from the water line, then a splash. The thunk of something piercing the side of the boat was what really worried the ponies onboard. Constance dashed to look over the side of the vessel.

Embedded in the side of the boat was Bard. Somehow, he had managed to rear up out of the water and jam his horn into the side of the boat. He hung just above the water line as Ridgeline dangled from his legs. Bard looked up at the pegasus with friendly yellow eyes.

"Permission to come aboard?" he asked. "Because this hurts a lot more

than you might expect.” Heart Chase joined Constance in staring over the side of the boat. The mares looked at each other.

“Yah did say it took more than two ponies to run a ship this size, didn’t yah?” asked Heart Chase. Constance nodded, and Heart Chase threw a rope overboard to the two ponies. The copper coated earth pony caught the rope in his teeth, and began dragging himself up. Ridgeline grabbed hold of Bard’s head with his back feet, and pried it from the side of the boat. The two ponies were dragged onto the deck moments later. Ridgeline was the first to his feet, and he bowed to Heart Chase.

“As a Knight of Celestia, I thank you, my fair lady,” he said with a bow. “Without you, this... Kin’s half baked plan surely would have failed.” He gestured to Bard with the manacled forelock. Bard’s forelock puppeted his movement for a moment.

“Uh, ya’ll aren’t pirates are yah?” said Heart Chase. “Cause if yah are, I’m gonna have to throw yah back overboard.” The two ponies looked to each other, then shook their heads. “Then ya’ll wouldn’t know how to sail would yah?”

“I do,” volunteered Bard. “But I’m not going to be able to do much with this lummoX on my fetlock.” He pointed his horn at the manacles, and they fell open.

“Why didn’t you do that sooner?” asked Ridgeline.

“Because I couldn’t concentrate with my head stuck in a plank!” shot back Bard. Ridgeline took another swing at the unicorn. He easily dodged and weaved out of the crashing hoof of the Knight. “Knock it off.” The earth pony only growled at Bard. The unicorn turned back to the mares. “I assume that you are the captain of this vessel, Miss...”

“Missus,” she corrected. It stung a bit to think that she may actually be a widow rather than a missus. “Missus Heart Chase. And I don’t claim to be Captain; I don’t even know how I got here on open water. I just want to get home to my family.”

“Fair enough,” said Bard. “Ridgeline! On those lines. Miss Constance, if you would please, let out some of that sail, and then give us a scouting report.

Captain, I'll need you on the wheel." The ponies broke and made for their stations. Heart Chase stood behind the wheel of the vessel, and took the handles in her teeth. "So where's home?"

"Bridleburg," said Heart Chase. "But I have no idea where we are, so I don't know how we're gonna get back." Bard looked out to the fog for a moment. "Sorry, I didn't catch yer name?"

"The name is Bard," he replied. "With this all this fog, we've got to be close to shore." He looked to the boat, and noticed the scorch marks that took up much of the rear of the vessel. "Have those always been there?" Heart Chase shrugged.

"They were there when I woke up," she said. Constance fluttered back down to the deck.

"It's foggy," she reported. "I can't see anything at all, and it's like that for miles. The air started getting thin before I broke through the fog bank, that's how bad it is." Constance looked over her shoulder. "I've never seen anything like it, that's for sure."

"Well then," said Bard. "I guess we'll have to go by compass."

"I didn't see one in the captain's quarters," said Heart Chase. "Yah can steer this tub while I go look." Heart Chase walked from the sterncastle, and down to the captain's quarters. She again searched through the room, and sure enough, there was no compass to be found. There was the glowing stone; it seemed to be pulsing now. She paused a moment to consider the new ponies on board. Could she trust them?

The copper coated earth pony had said that he was a Knight of Celestia, and he seemed the type: quick to anger, but polite to those at his station or above. He certainly had the build for it; he was as large as Iron Pick. She could probably trust him. The sky blue unicorn named Bard seemed to know what he was doing too and between him and Constance, it looked like they could get them at least back to land.

The ship swayed again as the winds began to pick up. Heart Chase was finally getting used to the rocking; she steadied herself by spreading her hooves wide and moving with the vessel. She walked from the Captain's

quarters toward the other door she hadn't yet been able to explore. It opened to a set of stairs that led to a hull filled with a month's worth of food. Heart Chase breathed a sigh of relief. Even if they were lost, they wouldn't starve to death. She came back on deck.

The fog had abated only slightly; they could now see for dozens of yards instead of just a few. The sail was full of wind, and it dragged them through the churning waters of... whatever bay they were supposed be in. Heart Chase wasn't really up on her geography, and she worried for a moment that her supposed crew might not take her where she wanted to go. It wasn't like they could sail up river. Or could they? How had Iron Pick expected to get home?

The word stuck in her mind like a thorn. What would be there waiting for her once she got back there? What happened to her niece and sister? She had seen so many Picks and Chases lying upon the ground as the Lunar Rebels destroyed her reception. Who would work the fields? There was so much fire; would there even be a farm to return to? Heart Chase paced the deck unconsciously. There were so many things to worry about: her family, her home, her new husband. She had no idea what was left of her life. She didn't even know what day it was. She could have been out for a week. Heart Chase turned to the copper coated earth pony.

"What day is it?" she asked.

"I don't know, m'lady," said Ridgeline. "I've been stuck in a cage for a week, I think. You might try asking the Lady Constance. She had booked passage with the pirates for some reason." Heart Chase left the pony to his work and walked to the forecastle where the pegasus was standing.

"Lady Constance, was it?" asked Heart Chase. Constance looked at her with an expression of pure confusion. "Yah happen to know what day it is?"

"Lady?" asked Constance. "I'm about as far removed from nobility as one gets."

"Sorry," said Heart Chase.

"Did that dear Knight tell you that?" she asked. "That poor colt. If we hadn't had all this silly nonsense with Nightmare Moon, he probably would have

never left whatever bumpkin town he came from. He would have found himself a nice filly, settled down, and had a score of foals. Now he's a soldier who thinks only of destroying the enemies of the Goddess."

Constance sighed, and looked out into the fog. "That war made monsters of us all." She looked back to Heart Chase. "But that's not what you asked, is it? It's Sunday afternoon. Or at least I think it is; it's too foggy to tell."

Sunday afternoon. That meant it had only been a day and a half since her wedding. That was a good sign. It gave her hope that she might be able to sail back up the river, and be back in Bridleburg within the next day or so. Now if the damn fog would just let up they'd...

"HARD TO PORT!" yelled Constance. "HARD TO PORT! WE'RE GOING TO CRASH!"

The crush of timber along the rocks was the most horrible sound any of the ponies had heard in a long time. The ship listed hard to starboard as the rocks punched through the hull. Ridgeline and Heart Chase were tossed across the deck by the violent lurching of their vessel. Ridgeline managed to grab Heart Chase in his arm, then catch a line in his teeth as they skidded across the deck. The copper coated stallion pushed Heart Chase back onto the deck before pulling himself up. Below deck, the two ponies heard the rush of water as it poured into the hull. Constance hovered above the two earth ponies.

"Where's Bard?" asked Heart Chase. "I don't see him!"

"I'll check the water," said Constance. "You two swim for shore. It's only about a quarter of a mile, I think. Follow the waves and watch out for rocks." Heart Chase and Ridgeline gave each other worried looks.

"But I can't swim!" protested Heart Chase. Ridgeline looked out at the rocky coast line. The boat was sinking and there really wasn't another option at the moment.

"Don't worry, m'lady," said Ridgeline. "I dragged that Kin through the water, I can certainly carry a dainty thing like you. Get on my back, and hold on." Heart Chase looked at the earth pony for a moment. The ship listed to the side with the snapping of timbers. Heart Chase grabbed his heck, and held on for dear life. They dove into the water and started swimming for shore.

Constance swooped low over the water, but saw no signs of Bard. Where was the mouthy git? The fog wasn't helping anything. Had he gone under? Was he still aboard the boat? She heard cursing from the ship, and flew back toward it. Bard had busied himself with tossing maps and equipment into a satchel. Constance set down as the ship began to splinter.

"What are you doing?" demanded Constance. "Get off the boat and swim!"

"You never let a ship go down with its rudder!" shouted Bard. He tossed the astrolabe and the glowing stone in the bag, and then dashed across the tilted deck. Constance chased after him into the forecastle. Bard grabbed up the sacks of bits and gems that Heart Chase had taken out earlier. He shoved the satchel at Constance, and locked eyes with her.

"Take this to shore," he ordered Constance. "I can't concentrate on swimming while floating that bag, so I'm counting on you. Make sure she gets it; this might be all she has left in the world. Don't fly off with it." Constance took the satchel in her teeth with an insulted look. "Don't give me that. Make sure that Heart Chase makes it to shore. I'll meet you on all on land."

Bard galloped out of forecastle. The deck began to splinter beneath him, and threatened to take him to the depths with it. With a running leap, he dove into the water as the ship shuddered to pieces behind him.

Chapter 4

On the Return

Red Chase awoke to the smoky scent of campfire and the sounds of autumn crickets. She had been wrapped in a blanket, and placed next to the fire to warm. The last thing she remembered was landing in the river; somepony had been kind enough to drag her out, apparently. She could hear the Dame River flowing behind her, perhaps a hundred yards away. Why she was here, and not back on the farm was anypony's guess. She got to her feet and looked around the campsite a moment. There was no pony here but herself.

The rush of the river water brought her back to the events right before she lost consciousness. That pony had hit them with a spell that tossed her and Quill into the river. She hadn't seen what had happened to either one of her aunts. Perhaps there would be answers on the river. She untangled herself from the blanket, and walked for the shores.

She was surrounded by trees, which meant she was at least twenty five miles away from Bridleburg. Probably south, if she had been fished from the river. Red listened carefully for the clank of scaled armor. She was far from the farm, but the attackers might still be nearby.

Red thought about the attack with some worry. What had happened in the aftermath? Was her family okay? What happened to Quill? And why was she worried about him? He was family, now, sort of, so it was okay to worry about him. But what of every pony else? She looked up the banks of the river for answer, and found none.

"Red Chase!" hissed a voice from the trees. "Get back in the woods! They were still sweeping the river as of this morning." Red looked to the trees and saw Sound Cloud gesturing her back into the woods. Red followed back to the camp site.

"What happened?" she asked. "Did you find Heart?"

"I haven't seen her," said Sound Cloud. "They haven't found her body, so

she may have gotten away. I can't say the same for Silk though." Red steadied herself at the news. She had only known Silk Pick for a few weeks, but the fact that he was dead struck her harder than she had thought it would. She looked back to Sound Cloud. "As for Apple, well..."

"Well what?" asked Red. "She's dead too? Come out and say it, Reverend. I want to know how much trouble we're really in here. I'm not a foal; I knew what was goin' on. "

"She's... in Bridleburg with Iron Pick," said Sound Cloud. "You've been out cold for a day and half, and so much has happened since then." He motioned for her to sit down. "Right after the bridal party was attacked, the attackers just vanished. Gone. Maybe two dozen ponies were killed, but they could have slaughtered everyone there. They found the guard ponies strangled in the fields. There was a traitor among Pick's house. I don't know if it was a servant, or what, but the simple fact of it is, someone set up Iron Pick and Heart Chase to be killed. They didn't succeed. Iron Pick is back at his home resting up, and Apple Chase is with him."

"Well that's great," said Red Chase. "Why aren't we there too?"

"Because they're not alone," said Sound Cloud. "There's some pony else pulling the strings now. I thought that your aunt's marriage was just a political thing, and it turns out I was right."

"Well, yeah," said Red Chase. "You really think anyone could love a cranky old stallion like Iron Pick?"

"That's my father you're talking about," said Quill. He dumped a load of firewood by the shelter. Red Chase sprang to her feet and wrapped her arms around the blue earth pony. She smiled a moment before pulling away in awkward silence.

"I, um, I'm glad to see your okay," she sputtered.

"Nice to see you too," said Quill, barely hiding a smile. "You catching her up, Reverend?"

"Just getting to the heart of the matter," said Sound Cloud. "The thing is, since Heart Chase is considered dead..."

“She’s not dead,” said Red Chase. “I know she isn’t; I can just tell. She’s not goin’ to get killed by some stupid river.”

“I know dear,” replied Sound Cloud. “But Iron Pick has already proposed to Apple Chase. I’m positive the pony behind all this is forcing the marriage to again solidify the political dealings.”

“Apple Chase may be the head of the family if Heart’s out of the way,” said Red. “But she’s already marr...” She stopped midsentence. Sound Cloud nodded quietly. “Damnit!” The red maned filly stamped a hoof in the dirt. “What are we doin’ out here then? Hidin’ like a bunch of scared bunnies? We’re goin’ to march back into Bridleburg and take back our city from that Glaive bastard and...”

“It’s not that easy,” said Quill. “The entire city is on alert for us. The city is under siege from the Lunar Rebels. You, me, and Heart Chase, we’re to be killed on sight. I don’t know exactly what Glaive is planning but I can take a guess.”

“Care to share?” asked Red Chase.

“With my father and your aunt as puppets, he can use the attack as reason to unite the families,” Quill explained. “He marries Apple Chase to secure the deal. The families support Pick as ruler, Bridleburg secedes, and Glaive’s got control of the army. The deals with Stalliongrad are already struck, and so long as the families are united in cause, it doesn’t matter who’s married to whom. Civil war comes, we win, Glaive’s got his Lunar Republic.”

Red Chase had to sit a moment to wrap her head around this. She had just started to enjoy politics too, and now she was in the middle of not just a revolution, but a false flag revolution. She really wasn’t sure what to do next. She looked out the river, and asked herself what Heart Chase would do. She wouldn’t sit cowering out in the woods, that’s for sure. She got to her feet.

“Alright,” said Red Chase. “We’ve got to get to the farm, and get the family to storm the Pick homestead. Then, we need to get Apple Chase and Iron Pick out from underneath Glaive. If we can do that, well, there’s a lot more

of us then there are of them. It's not like an army wasn't being raised anyway. Ponies just need a leader." She looked to her two companions. "Might as well be us. It doesn't sound like any other pony is stepping up." Sound Cloud shook his head.

"I can't help you in this endeavor," said Sound Cloud. "I'm one of only a half a dozen pegasi in Bridleburg, not counting what forces Glaive brought. We're all supposed to be out here looking for you and I've got to get back into town before they get suspicious."

"I understand, Reverend," said Red Chase. "We never saw you; you never saw us. We'll think of a way to get take back our city, I promise." The pegasus nodded, and took to the sky. Red Chase turned to Quill Pick. "Well, now what?" she asked.

"We need a plan," said Quill. "We need ponies, we need weapons, and we need them within the week. Dad said that we should expect Celestia's Knights shortly after the wedding so we've been raising the army in the mountains."

Red Chase blinked in amazement. That was at least fifty miles from where they were. That meant at least two days of walking, three if they were going to sneaky about it. She looked around the campsite for any supplies or gear.

"Well, looks like we better start hoofin' it," said Red. "We got any food? Gear? Anything?"

"Only some hard tack and rope," said Quill. "Not much to go on, I know."

"Well, I'm no slouch when it comes to living off the land," said Red Chase. "I'll see if I can scare us up some lunch. We can probably make it to the farm by tomorrow morning, and resupply." She looked at Quill for a moment. He was obviously thinking, and Red Chase could see the wheels turning in his head. "I remember when I got my cutie mark, it didn't make much sense." She looked back at her flank. Two horse shoe tied with ribbon adorned her yellow coat. "I was always good at bringin' things together, but I can't believe it's all come to this. It's up to us, Quill. If this is gonna happen, it's got to be us."

Shivers traced down Red's spine. Now more than ever, the fate of Bridleburg rested in the hooves of two ponies. Succeed or fail, whatever she and Quill did would change the world. She looked to the blue earth pony for reassurance. He nodded, and gathered up what few supplies they had.

"Let's do this."

...

"I really wish this fog would let up," said Constance. "It's doing a number on my mane." Bard rolled his yellow eyes. They were lost, without food or supplies, and here this mare was complaining about her mane. He checked the tree line again to try to get a sense of direction.

They had been walking for two hours in the direction they guessed was west. Bard and Heart Chase had come to this conclusion by sending Constance far enough above the fog line that she could see the sun. Unfortunately, the pegasus had zero sense of direction, so what they were actually headed was any ponies guess. Still, by using some reasonable guesses, they had determined they were along the southern coast line of Equestria, directly south of the Everfree Forest, and about a hundred miles south-east of Bridleburg. That meant at least four days of walking, if they didn't find a boat.

Still, the company was at least tolerable. Ridgeline marched in the rear of the small herd, and kept alert for any threats coming from the Everfree Forest. Bard occasionally checked the map to pinpoint land marks. Every hour, Constance would fly upward to garner a sense of direction, and Heart Chase led the pack. They walked in relative silence, as the unnatural fog seemed to follow them wherever they went. They tried walking further inland, but walking through the forest and the fog at the same time proved impossible. They instead hugged the coast line, knowing that if they kept Saddle Bay to their left, they would eventually come to the Dame River. It also might add another twenty miles onto their trip, but that was a small price to pay for knowing you were headed the right direction.

The herd of ponies stopped for the evening as the fog grew darker. With not much food, and next to no supplies, Heart Chase and Ridgeline set off into the forest to gather what they could for the hungry ponies. Being earth

ponies, they had a certain sense of the land. That, combined with the practical knowledge that comes from farming and soldiering, Heart Chase and Ridgeline were easily able to scare up some berries and starchy tubers to feed their traveling companions.

Heart Chase was skeptical of calling them her friends. After all, she had just met these ponies, and she was, as it stood, an attempted traitor to the crown. In her talks with Ridgeline, she had discovered that the pony was simply a farm colt that had gotten drafted into the war. He took to ideas quickly, and made them part of himself. To him, everything was black and white. Heart Chase almost admired his simplistic view of the world. The shades of gray that had come to overshadow Heart Chase's life in the past few months would have surely painted her as evil in his eyes.

So she let him talk. She let him talk about his home, about the destruction of his home that had forced him to defend Celestia, and about his simple thoughts on the state of the world. He was, in many ways, still just a colt. He was enormous, yes, and brutally strong. He had killed ponies in battle and in defense, but there was still a colt like innocence in the way he sought approval from his superiors. Every berry bush or tuber he found was offered as if a gift to a queen. Heart Chase offered her heartfelt thanks as they gathered the last of the tubers.

The ponies walked back to the camp site. Bard was holding a hollow log steady for Constance as she squeezed water out the fog clouds. Heart Chase had to approve of the pegasus's clever use of her goddess given gifts. A fire burned behind them; damp tinder apparently didn't matter to a pony with magic.

"We found food," said Heart Chase. "Berries and tubers mostly, though we found a couple a late bloomin' apple trees. Ridgeline here is quite the apple buckler."

"Why thank you, m'lday," said Ridgeline. "I haven't bucked apples in years, but I suppose it's one of those things you don't forget."

"We also brought a bunch of downed branches from the forest," continued Heart Chase. "I figure we're gonna need some sort of shelter. With all this damp, it's gonna be real cold tonight." Bard nodded in agreement.

With food and water handled, the ponies set to making a shelter for the evening. Ridgeline's immense strength, combined with Bard's magic soon resulted in a well constructed lean-to that was big enough for four ponies to sleep. It was going to be cramped, and Ridgeline felt compelled to complain.

"I spent a week in a cage beside that... Kin," he protested. "I refuse to sleep beside him another night longer."

"You do realize you snore, right?" asked Bard. "You snore like... I have no idea. I've never heard anything that loud in my life. I simply cannot believe such unholy noises come from a pony."

"You're one to talk about unholy," snorted Ridgeline. "You and all your rebellious friends..."

"Now just hold on a second," interrupted Heart Chase. "Whatever sides of the war yah might have been on, it doesn't matter now. We're all in the together, so don't talk politics while we're still out here. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes m'lady," replied Ridgeline. Bard only nodded.

"Now come get some supper," said Head Chase. "And I don't wanna hear yew two fightin' any."

The two earth ponies had found plenty for their rag-tag herd. The apples, tubers, and berries were enough for the evening's meal, and most of tomorrow's as well. The ponies sat around the fire after dinner and tried to think of safe topics to discuss. Constance wanted to discuss fashion trends, but it was clear that not even the other mare in their group had any idea what she was talking about. Heart Chase wasn't about to discuss the circumstances leading to her marooning and Ridgeline only want to talk about Celestia. It was up to Bard to get a conversation rolling, and he only had one idea.

"Well, since we're apparently stuck together for the next few days," said Bard, "perhaps we should exchange cutie mark tales?"

"Well that's a nice idea," said Heart Chase. "You want to go first

Constance?" Constance looked back on her rose colored flank, and at the broken heart that was displayed there.

"Well," she began, "I was raised in a gypsy caravan. We traveled from place to place in the Stalliongrad providence looking for work, or just putting on shows wherever we went. Even when I was a filly, ponies young and old would flock to me. They just loved my auburn mane, and would spend hours just fawning over me. Not that I could blame them really. I mean, I am gorgeous." She pulled the bandana from her head and tossed her mane. Even after being tied up all day, her mane was still looked as if it she had spent an hour perfecting it. She fluttered her violet eyes at the ponies.

"My father was always worried that someone would try to foal-nap me, and he told me never to accept gifts from strangers." She swished her tail underneath Heart Chase's chin with a coy smile. Heart Chase found herself trying to hide her uncomfortable blushing. "I never did, of course, but then again, once you know a pony, they're not a stranger now are they?" She pouted her lips, and winked at Heart Chase. "I was a bit of a late bloomer when it came to my cutie mark though," she said. "Every colt in the caravan had a crush on me. They would bring gems or flowers to my wagon, in hopes that I would notice them even for a moment. I did my best to let them know that daddy wouldn't like them coming around, but they just kept coming back. It seemed I was cat nip for ponies, and when I rejected the last one, that's when my cutie mark appeared." She displayed her flank to the three ponies. Ridgeline was staring into space, trying not to stare at the mare and Heart Chase was shifting uncomfortably in her seat. Bard was seemingly unphased her sultry display.

"Seems kind of young to know about all that," said Bard.

"The gypsies aren't exactly known for their patience," Constance replied. "We live hard, love harder, breed early, and die young. Those of us who live to forty are invariably old crones who throw curses as if they were parties." She smiled at the unicorn. "And how about you, darling?" she asked Bard. "How did you come about your cutie mark?" Bard stood and looked back at his sky blue flank.

"As you can see, my cutie mark is a crescent moon," began Bard. "My parents were minor nobility who had great aspirations for my brother and I.

They had planned to send us to the finest schools to nurture our special talents, whatever they may have been. I was much like a lot of young colts. I tried a great deal of things to try to make my cutie mark appear. I tried horn fighting with my brother,” he grimaced a bit. “I nearly lost an eye doing that; Luna be praised he was strong. I tried gardening, and nearly burned down our manor.” Heart Chase started to ask how he had managed that before Bard interrupted. “Let’s just say that Fire Lilies grow far too quickly in a hot box and leave it at that, shall we? Anyway, I had about given up, when my parents took us to see Luna raise the moon for the Winter Solstice. When I saw how sad she looked, I asked my parents why she was upset. They said it was because so few ponies loved her beautiful night.” He gazed far into the distance as he remembered that day from so many years ago. There was a long pause before he shook his head.

“So I set my mind on a way to make Luna happy again,” he continued. “I learned magic, parlor tricks, some slight of hoof. Things that would entertain the young princess; things that would make her happy. I never did get the chance to try...” He paused again, and stared out into the bay with a blank expression. He snapped back to his story. “I earned my cutie mark when I learned this little number.”

Bard pointed a glowing horn at Ridgeline. The copper stallion felt something force him his feet. He began dancing a little jig against his own will, as if he were a puppet on strings.

“Hi there!” Ridgeline found himself saying. “I love Celestia! She’s so pretty! I want to brush her fluffy pink mane! Brushie, brushie, brushie!” Ridgeline fell to the ground with a thump. The earth pony jumped to his feet, and snarled at Bard. “Why you little...”

“Sorry, sorry,” said Bard. “It was unfair of me to demonstrate on you, but I thought it improper to control one of the mares.” He put up his hooves in a defensive apology. “Plus I’ve already been inside of your head, and there’s not all that much there. That trick really only works on ponies who aren’t expecting it and who lack the will power to resist it.” Ridgeline only growled. “Regardless, when I found that I could read minds and control pony’s actions, I got my cutie mark.”

“That seems terribly dangerous,” said Constance. “What’s to keep you from abusing that sort of power?” Bard simply shook his head.

“Only a good sense of judgment,” he said. “I know that such a spell is misused by another pony all the time. That was the reason I left the Lunar Rebellion to side with the Kin of Luna. I can enslave ponies with my powers; Equestria didn’t need any more of that sort of thing.” He turned to Ridgeline. “How about you? How did you come by your cutie mark, solider boy?” Ridgeline looked to his copper flanks. A pile of rocks adorned his hip.

“It’s kind of silly,” he said. “I’ve always been a big pony, much bigger than any pony else. I grew up on a rock farm way in the north of Equestria; right on the border of the Griffin Kingdoms, as a matter of fact. I had a bunch of sisters and brothers and we all worked the rocks. I guess you down here call it a quarry.”

“Wait, you’re from Hoofswell?” asked Heart Chase. “That’s literally a thousand miles from here. How in the name of Celestia did you wind up all the way down here?” Ridgewell thought for a minute. How did he wind up here? “Sorry,” said Heart Chase. “Please, continue with your cutie mark story.”

“Uh, right,” said Ridgewell. “Anyway, a bunch of griffons started harassing me and my brothers one day. Got in a bit of a scrap with them; there was no harm done. Then one started picking on my little sister. He picked her up off the ground, and tried to carry her away. I don’t know about you, m’lady, but where I’m from, earth ponies are really afraid of heights.” Heart Chase nodded. Like most earth ponies, she too suffered from a crippling fear of heights.

“Anyway, I saw this griffin trying to take away my sister,” he stood and picked up an apple sized rock from the stony beach. “I said ‘You let go of my sister or I’m going to split your head, you feathered bastard!’ I remember that too, because it was the first time I was mad enough to swear. That griffin just flipped me the bird.” The ponies shared a confused look. It clicked for Ridgeline a second later. “Oh, it’s a rude gesture among the griffons. It looks uh...” He looked at the hoof holding the rock, then at the other. He was at loss. “Well, ponies don’t have anything similar. So he was trying to get away with my sister. I toss the rock in the air, and then...”

Ridgeline spun in place and bucked the rock. The sound of hoof on rock snapped like thunder in the foggy sky, and the rock screamed through the

air. It smashed into a tree. The rock punched through the trunk and out the other side. The tip of the tree groaned for a moment before falling into the forest amid the shrieks and caws of woodland creatures.

"I got my cutie mark for rock bucking, I guess," said Ridgeline. "Griffons didn't bother us after that. I joined the war after the Hoofswell attack. And now here I am." He looked to Heart Chase. "How about you, m'lady?" Heart Chase looked back on her own yellow flanks to the three hearts that were emblazed there.

"I was the first of that crop of foals to get my cutie mark," said Heart Chase. "I guess I was lucky that my Daddy had the same talent I did. He could see the value in things, and bring them to light. I was always able to do that too. I took what other ponies cast aside, and made it work." She scratched her head with a hoof. "What's funny is I wasn't doin' anything special when I got my cutie mark; just plantin' seeds. Plantin' seeds, and walkin' along the seed rows. I still don't know why it's three hearts. It's got nothin' to do with anything." She shrugged her shoulders. "Out of every pony I've ever met, I've got the least interestin' cutie mark story." She looked around to her travel companions. "That includes you lot too, I guess."

Chapter 5

Where Loyalties Lie

Red Chase was right to assume that it would take a day to make their way north to the farms. Patrols of Lunar Rebels were covering the hills that lead into the forest with some frequency, and the only marked path was heavily guarded. What was more disheartening that some local ponies seemed to have joined the fight against their own region and were actually helping the patrols. Quill dismissed them as a bunch of cowards who were only loyal to whomever seemed to be strongest at the moment.

Still, the fact that the locals were offering support to these invaders meant that the Picks and the Chases were both losing support in light of the incident at the wedding. No matter. A few ponies supporting a failed group of rebels would mean little in the big picture. Quill had to guess that there weren't too many Lunar Rebels left, and that this particular operation was a sort of last ditch effort for them. He felt guilty for wishing the entire incident on another family.

It took the two ponies a few hours to creep past the wood line and into the Bridleburg Valley. Red Chase had the genius idea of cutting reeds from the river banks, and using them as breathing pipes as they swam up river. By the time they got out of the water, the two ponies were freezing and sopping wet. The last of the summer's warmth had left and the chill of the river did nothing for the mood of the ponies. They had made it past the patrols, but they were wet, freezing, and still ten miles from where they needed to be.

As night began to fall, the soggy ponies knew they weren't going to be able to get back to the farm that night. Not without drastic measures, at least. Cold, tired, and hungry, Quill Pick and Red Chase were in no mood for heroics, and instead searched for a place to spend the evening.

They managed to find a fishing shack on the edge of a calm spot in the river. It wasn't much, as there was little room for two ponies. Still, they were exhausted, and there wasn't really anywhere else for the two to rest.

The shed was unlocked, and the inside stripped bare of everything but a tattered blanket. It was enough to cover the two earth ponies, if they slept close together. Quill said something about impropriety. Red reminded him that survival trumped manners any day of the week. The two ponies huddled together under the ratty blanket for a few minutes before Quill drifted off into the near sleep of exhaustion. Tired as she was, Red couldn't fall asleep. She was worried about her future, and about the world around her.

"Quill?" asked Red Chase. The blue earth pony woke up enough to turn the young mare lying at his side. "Do you think we're going to be okay?"

"I really don't know," said Quill. "A lot of nasty things have happened in just the two days we've been gone. I know between you and Apple Chase, you'll be able to manage your farms just fine." He fell silent for a moment before speaking again. "I wish I had your confidence, Red. If something were to happen to my father, I don't know if I'd be ready to take the reins of the business. I mean, I can do paperwork, sure, but Silk was the brains of the family." He sighed, and laid his head back down on Red. "I miss him already."

"He might still be out there, Quill," said Red with a reassuring smile. "Maybe we'll find him, and he can help us. Don't give up hope. It's like Auntie Heart always said 'You can find strength in anything.' Sometimes life is all just a test to see how strong you are." Red looked around the tiny shack bleakly for a moment. "I guess we're pretty darn strong if you ask me."

"You're right," said Quill. "I'm sure it'll all turn out for the best." Quill and Red closed their eyes, and finally drifted to sleep. Red really hoped that Aunt Heart was faring better than her.

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"It is highly improper," said Ridgeline. "The ladies may take this shelter, I will make my own."

"You do realize that ponies are herd animals right?" asked Bard.

"Quit yer fussing, and lay down," said Heart Chase. "Ain't no one gonna try

and take yer virtue in the night. And if yah start comin' on to me, I'll wallop yah." Ridgeline grunted in disapproval.

"M'lady, I insist," said Ridgeline. "Bard and I will construct our own shelter. You mares have a good night's rest."

Heart Chase shrugged her shoulders and laid upon the leaves that she and Constance had piled together. The pegasus trotted over a few minutes later and laid nearly on top of her. Constance cuddled up close to Heart Chase, insisting that they keep warm together. Heart had a hard time ignoring the mares strong scent. Even after a say of walking and fleeing from ships, she still smelled of licorice. It was distracting, to say the least.

"So, uh..." stammered Heart Chase. "Yah sure smell nice..."

"Ancient family recipe for perfume," said Constance, and she rubbed against Heart Chase. "Mmm... you're soft," she purred. "I wouldn't expect a working pony to have such a soft coat. How do you do it?"

"Uh... nothin' special," stuttered Heart Chase. "Must be all that swimmin'. Heh."

"My dear you're shivering," said Constance. The pegasus wrapped a wing around the earth pony. "There, that'll keep you warm."

Constance laid her head on Heart Chase's shoulder and immediately fell asleep. Heart Chase found herself trapped in a velvety hell of licorice scent and downy wings. There was no way she was getting any sleep this evening. On the other side of the campfire, the two stallions were erecting their own shelter amid Bard's annoyed protests.

"You're really a dunce, you know that?" asked Bard. "We could be warm and asleep right now, huddled up with other ponies, just like nature intended. Instead, we're over here, making our own shelter where we're going to be cold and miserable, and still tired when morning comes around." Bard floated the last of the branches into place, and began weaving them with his magic. "I realize you've got this whole 'Celestia's Code' thing you've got to keep to about chastity and purity and all that happy nonsense, but would it kill you to just relax for a moment?"

“A commoner such as myself should never share a bed with ladies such as them,” said Ridgeline. He bucked a tree, and rained leaves upon the shelter. “To do so would be improper, and I would risk my knighthood.”

Bard only sighed. His part was done, so he lay beneath the shelter in the leaves that Ridgeline had kicked down. He looked across the fire to see Constance draped over Heart Chase like a blanket. Heart Chase was lying perfectly still, with her eyes open wide in what looked like terror. What could possibly be wrong with her? Was the poor mare in some sort of trouble? He let his magic wander to read Heart’s surface thoughts. He snapped back a moment later.

“Luna’s mercy!” whispered Bard. “No wonder she’s so wound up.” He found himself chuckling at Heart’s pseudo misfortune as he laid his head down to sleep. Ridgeline joined him a moment later, and sat as far away from Bard as possible.

“You do realize the point of shelter was so that we could sleep close and conserve heat, right?” asked Bard. “It’s like you don’t know anything about survival.”

“Shut up,” muttered Ridgeline. “You do nothing but talk.”

“It’s part of what I’m good at,” said Bard, as he moved to Ridgeline’s side. “You sleep on my flank, I’ll sleep on yours. It’s like having a warm pillow.” Ridgeline only grunted. Bard settled down and put his head on the earth pony’s hip. It was like sleeping on a rock. Still, they were both warm enough, and that’s what really mattered at the moment. Bard felt himself drifting off to sleep when Ridgeline spoke up again.

“I should stand guard,” he said. Bard picked up his head and turned to look at the earth pony. His horn sparkled with a soft blue glow and a cloud of shimmering light surrounded Ridgeline’s face. The earth pony collapsed into slumber, and a moment later, he began snoring. Bard buried his head in the leaves and tried to sleep. These ponies would drive him crazy if he let them.

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“Thank you,” said Iron Pick. “We’ll lay his body to rest in the morning. Have

the quartermaster ready the new armor for myself and the troops. We shall leave for the mountains as soon as my son is buried.” The pony bowed to Iron Pick, and walked down the hall. Iron watched for a minute, and then closed the door behind him.

Iron Pick smiled as door clanked shut. His face hurt, but the good doctor had taken excellent care of him. So much to do, so little time to do it in. He would have to leave ponies here to watch for others, but it was of little concern. If they were still alive, by the time they made it back here he and the army would be long gone, having taken the fight to Celestia’s meager forces.

They would descend from the hills with the thundering of Hell at their hooves. The army of Bridleburg was a thousand ponies strong, new armed, armored, and ready for battle. Though they faced veterans of the Lunar Rebellion, Iron Pick wasn’t concerned. He outnumbered them three to one, and with the reinforcements he had secured, the fight would be brutal and short. He turned round to face Apple Chase, who had sprawled upon his bed in a seductive pose.

“Well, my dear,” he said. “It seems everything has gone according to plan.”

“Pity about Silk,” said Apple Chase. “If it weren’t for him, the Remnants wouldn’t have gotten the best of ‘your’ guards.” Iron Pick had to chuckle as he curled next to Apple Chase.

“A lucky accident,” said Iron Pick. “It’s not like I was aiming for him. Still, it’s just one less way to split the prize.” He smiled at Apple Chase and wrapped his arms around her. “And that worthless husband of yours...”

“Wasn’t even smart enough to run the farm,” said Apple Chase. “I’m glad he’s dead. Now he can’t instill his lessons of failure on my children.” Iron Pick chuckled again.

“I do apologize for having to use this body,” he said. “Once we crush Celestia’s Knights, poor Iron Pick will have to meet with some sort of painful tragedy.” He put a hoof to chin to contemplate. “I’m thinking a landslide. Maybe a cave in where he can smother and consider the error of his way.”

“Prolonged,” said Apple Chase with an approving nod. “Really gives you time to contemplate your failures.” She tossed her arms around Iron Pick. “I’m so glad I met you, Glaive. You’re everything a mare could wish for.”

“And I thank Nightmare Moon for guiding me to you from her prison,” replied Glaive. “Our queen couldn’t let such an apple of opportunity go unpicked. Your ambition and ruthlessness will make you a princess, my dear.” He kissed Apple Chase. “And until our queen returns, we shall rule over Equestria in her stead.”

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It was morning before too long. The fog had dissipated quite a bit, but still hung in the early morning air as if to keep away those who would seek out the ponies. Heart Chase was dead set on staying in bed for as long as possible, considering how long it took for her to fall asleep the previous evening. Constance took the opportunity to take an early morning flight above the fog bank, and verify their location. Luckily, they were a lot closer than they had previously guessed, and it knocked a full day off their expected trip.

Bard had floated Heart Chase’s satchel away from her, and was busy shuffling through what gear they had: a couple dozen bits, some gems of various grades, a rudder, a log, an astrolabe, and a glowing stone. It was all a bit disappointing, though it was the stone that interested him most. It had some sort of magic to it, obviously, and the spell attached to it had something to do with the weather. Bard was completely baffled by it, as weather magic was something so far out of the scope of his talents as to be impossible. Still, it might be useful, if they could figure out what the heck it was for. He floated the satchel back next to Heart Chase when she snapped awake.

“And what the heck do yah think yer doin’ goin’ through my stuff?” she asked.

“I needed to see what we had,” said Bard. “If it weren’t for me, you’d have none of that anyway.” Heart Chase glared at the unicorn for a minute before throwing the satchel over her shoulders.

“Don’t go rootin’ through my things,” said Heart Chase. “And don’t go

rootin' through my head neither. I got a right to privacy, yah know." She pointed to the still sleeping Ridgeline. "I saw what yah did to him last night. You pull that sort of stunt again, I'm gonna lay yah out, yah hear me?" Bard only raised an eyebrow at the yellow earth pony.

"Missus Chase, if you so much as look at me the wrong way I'll have you dancing a jig," said Bard. "I'm not a pony to be trifled with, and I am here at my own behest. If you want to start getting snippy with me, I'll simply teleport home and be done with your merry band." Heart Chase just shook her head.

"If you can teleport, then why didn't yah mention it last night?" asked Heart Chase. "Take me home, and I'll make sure yer rewarded fer yer trouble." She nudged Ridgeline with a hoof. The copper coated pony shot to his feet.

"SIR, YES, SIR," he barked. He blinked, then looked around. Heart Chase stared at him a moment with a slack jaw. She looked back to Bard, who only shrugged. "Sorry about that, m'day," said Ridgeline. "Old habits and all."

"So, about that teleport?" asked Heart Chase.

"Oh, he can't do that," said Ridgeline. "He always said he could just pop off the ship anytime he wanted, but he never did." It was Bard's turn to growl at Ridgeline. "Turns out he can't really do that sort of magic without candles and circles and a whole bunch of other things. Bard isn't half the magician he boasts that he is."

"Will you shut up?" demanded Bard. His horn sparkled for a second and the cloud of sleep rolled around Ridgeline's head. A yellow hoof knocked Bard to the ground with a meteoric punch. After a moment, Bard's eyes stopped rolling long enough to see Heart Chase standing over him.

"I told yah," said Heart Chase. "One more spot of magic out of yah against any one of us, and I'll have Ridgeline buck yah through a tree. Now, if yer gonna come with us, yer gonna play by my rules." Bard rubbed his jaw in pain.

"Who died and made you Princess?" asked Bard.

“You want this little party to be a democracy?” asked Heart Chase. “Tough. I’m callin’ the shots here, and if yah don’t want any part of it, then yah can just git.” Bard only glared at Heart Chase.

“Fine,” said Bard, as he got to his feet. He started reading Heart Chase’s mind to expose her deepest secrets, but her mind was busy humming a catchy and irritating song that immediately got stuck in Bard’s head instead. She apparently knew more about psychological warfare than she let on. Constance fluttered back to the camp site as the morning fog continued to burn off.

“We’re only about ten miles away from the river,” she said. “Once we hit that, we can try to either book passage upstream, or hike north until we hit a different settlement.” Bard levitated the regional maps from the satchel and looked them over. The nearest settlement on this side of the river was Hackney Cove. They might be able to find river pirates willing to take them that far, or they might all wind up shanghaied again. Either scenario was likely, but with no choice other than walking, they set out toward the cove.

The fog finally lifted as the ponies set out that morning. Heart Chase led the herd with her commanding presence, as Constance flew above checking for landmarks and threats. Bard walked in silence beside Heart Chase, and Ridgeline took up the rear. He was carrying much of the food that they had gathered the previous evening in a makeshift basket that Bard had created from the woven shelter roof. Hopefully, they could spend the evening in a hotel, or even just a stable. Anything was better than sleeping on the ground.

Heart Chase took the time walking to examine what she had with her. She had enough funds to book passage back to Bridleburg, the maps, and other sundries and she could probably sell the brass instrument for a good price as well. They could be back in Bridleburg by tomorrow afternoon. the clouded quartz stone is what concerned her the most. It was obviously magical, but it wasn’t glowing anymore, and when she started to look at it, Bard wouldn’t shut up about it.

Heart Chase almost looked forward to getting rid of Bard; his mouthy arrogance really began to grate on her nerves after the third hour of walking. After shedding his sullen pouting from that morning’s rebuke, Bard was endlessly chatty about the coast, the pirate cove, and anything else he

felt he could expound upon at length. As it turned out, he had been sailing since the end of the Lunar Rebellion, and he had visited nearly everything along the southern coast of Equestria. His ability to read minds and implant thoughts had come in handy getting him the easiest jobs aboard ships, and out of any real work. It wasn't until he had run into Einhorn that his inability to show any sort of respect to authority got him in trouble. As it turned out, his power didn't work on those who weren't ponies.

The morning of walking came to a halt a mile or so outside of Hackney Cove. Heart Chase decided it was best to eat lunch out of town so that they could make a quick break for it if trouble arose. Ridgeline passed out the berries and apples they had saved from that morning's breakfast, and the ponies ate in silence. It was a nice change from Bard's endless prattling. Constance finished her lunch first and walked to a small puddle that had been left from the high tide. She was fixing her hair.

"I've got to look my best," she said with a wink. "Hackney Cove is where I work, and my friends will all be dying to hear my latest tale of adventure."

"Miss Constance is a landless noble," said Ridgeline. "She's raising an army in this... disreputable city to retake her home." Ridgeline rolled his eyes. "Really, she should have just asked Celestia's Knights to help her, but I can see how her noble pride prevents her from doing that." Heart Chase shot a questioning look at Constance. She flashed a sly smile.

"Oh, Ridgeline," she said. "You are truly the only pony who understands me. Be a dear, and head into town to announce my arrival at the Swan's Head." Ridgeline bowed to the pegasus, and started walking toward the city. Heart Chase only shook her head.

"And what do you really do?" she asked.

"I bring the dance of my people to the areas outside of Stalliongrad," she said. "I'm a steward of the message of peace and grace from the Gypsies to those who would otherwise never know it."

"She's a prostitute," said Bard with a flippant wave. "She may dance, sure, but it's for money, and often in the private rooms of those who pay for her company."

“Consort!” protested Constance. “And what I do for a living is at least honest work, unlike you, you charlatan. If it weren’t for your spells and puppeteering, you’d have blisters on your hooves like the rest of us.” Bard was chastised into silence at the remark.

The trio walked in silence toward the town of Hackney Cove. In the loosest sense of the word it was a town. It had hard packed dirt streets, homes, and ponies living there. It even had shops and businesses. What it lacked was any sort of real government. Weather there just did whatever it pleased, or whatever the pegasi felt it should do that day. Leaves stayed on the few trees that were there, and if there had been snow, it would have melted whenever the sun got around to it. Still, it was full of ponies, a wide variety of other species inhabited the town as well. Ponies walked from place to place, hawking their wares, and. Griffons nested on rooftops, and Hamites roamed the streets looking for things to do. Zebras speckled the crowds, as did donkeys and mules.

Heart Chase was taken aback by such a sight; she had never seen such variety of creatures in her life. At most, she had seen a donkey or two, but they were such pariahs in Bridleburg that no pony ever actually approached them. It was dizzying to realize that she had thus far lived such a sheltered life. Perhaps this trip out of her comfort zone would do her a world of good, especially if she were going to try to rule over creatures that she knew nothing about. She drank in the experience and tried to smile. She began to take in the details, and watched how these non-ponies lived.

They were pretty much like ponies: they worked, they played, and they relaxed. She was sure they wanted the same things that ponies did too: a place to live, food to fill their bellies, and some bits in their pocket. It was what anyone wanted. How they got to that point was what started to cross her mind as they arrived at the Swan’s Head. Ridgeline stood at the door, and opened it for the mares. He walked in behind them, and let the door slam in Bard’s face.

Chapter 6

Cracks in the Foundation

The Swan's Head was the sort of place where high society would gather if the highest society you had was lower middle class. Rather than tapestries and quiet music, it was filled with tattered window dressings and the sort of quiet despair that comes from equines asking "What have I done with my life?" It was quite charming if you liked melancholy and sort of sad if you didn't.

Truthfully, it was the nicest place in Hackney Cove. The furniture may have been run down, but it was all whole. The window dressings may have been ratty, but there were windows. The drinks weren't watered down, and the food wasn't full of maggots. The owner of the establishment kept things quiet and patrons knew better than to start any nonsense.

There was gaggle of working girls that were standing at a table when the four ponies walked in. Ridgeline had announced the presences of Her Lady Constance of Stalliongrad, and bowed to her as she passed through the door. The girls tittered in amusement at the stallion that would treat a prostitute as nobility. They approached Constansce, all smiles and grins.

"Got a live one did yah?" asked a griffin. She was draped in a tartan that exposed more than it concealed to tantalizing effect. "And lookit him! All strong and fulla muscle he is!" She gave Ridgeline the once over. "Wouldn't think a farm boy like 'im be able to afford to travel with the likes of you."

"Looks like you've brought an entire crew," said a zebra. She was wearing a sarong, and had bangles around both hooves. "Are these ponies really loyal to you?"

"I am sworn to protect the innocent, and uphold the codes of Celestia," said Ridgeline. "I will faithful protect the Lady Constance and Lady Heart Chase until I am no longer needed, or I receive other orders." The girls giggled in reply.

"Frugal!" squawked the griffon. "You best roll out the red carpet; we got us

nobility 'ere!" The donkey behind the bar looked up from his scroll at the incoming ponies, snorted, and immediately went back to writing. The griffon turned back to Ridgeline, and ran a tail under his chin with a purr. "Why don't you let Gina take you upstairs and reward you for your 'service' to our lady Constance?"

"D...duty is reward enough," stammered Ridgeline. "And if I s...should leave her, who would p...protect her then?" The girls shared an uproarious laugh at the blushing pony. Constance only shook her head with a giggle.

"Now, now, girls," she chided. "Ridgeline is off limits to you. He is my noble protector, and I won't have you breaking his vows."

"Break more than that he would," said the zebra. "I bet a pony his size has got to be good." Ridgeline was completely baffled by the zebra's remark, though it caused the girls to again descend into fits of laughter. Heart Chase stepped up to speak.

"Ladies," she said. "I need to get back to Bridleburg. Do you know of any ships that are headed that direction?" The girls turned to look at the yellow pony. She wasn't dressed as one of them, and she carried herself with a certain authority that suggested that she might be more than just common stock. They fell quiet for a moment before Gina spoke up.

"Not much traffic goin' up river, dearie," said the griffon. "Your best bet is Ricoh; he's the best barge captain this side of Equestria. He can get you there in a day's time, if that's where you're headed." Heart Chase nodded her thanks to the griffon.

"Thank you, Miss," said Heart Chase. She turned back to her group of ponies. "And thank you all for your help; especially you, Constance. I couldn't have done it without you."

"No trouble at all love," said Constance. "But please, allow me to escort you to the docks. I'd hate to leave you in trouble so close to your goal." The ponies said their goodbyes to the working girls. They replied with blown kisses and coy waves as the herd walked back out into the streets of Hackney Cove.

The streets had begun to spread out a bit. Ponies had gone back to work at

their shops or ships. The southern docks bustled with the loading of cargo as Equines, Hamites, and deer all worked together to ready ships for their next great adventure. Further into the city, the streets began to funnel into the eastern docks where shallow drafted riverboats made ready to head upstream for trade, smuggling, or whatever else they needed to do. It was breeze to find Ricoh's ship, as it was the only triple masted barge on the river.

A crimson coated pig who had covered himself in nautical tattoos was barking orders to the mixed crew aboard the deck of the barge. His colorful language made Ridgeline blush with embarrassment, whereas Bard had to chuckle at the way he turned phrases. Constance tapped him on the shoulder with a polite hemming.

"And just what in the bleeding horn of... Constance!" The pig replaced his surly stare with a lecherous smile. "And what can Richo do for you today? I really don't have time if you're working right now, though I do always enjoy your company. I'm ready to set sail up river to Bridleburg; got a load of catapults for them. Why they'd need that sort of firepower is beyond me." The pig looked over her companions, paying special attention to Heart Chase. "And who are your companions?"

"My name is Heart Chase," said the yellow mare. "I'd like to book passage to Bridleburg, if you're headed there."

"What, all of you?" asked Ricoh. He pointed to Ridgeline. "I'll take that lummo there; he looks like he could haul the barge there himself. Of course Miss Constance is always welcome aboard the Boar's Head, but Bard can stay here. I've lost too much money to him at cards to allow him anywhere near my wallet.

"Nice to see you again too," said Bard. "You still owe me money, if I remember correctly. But, no, we're not headed North, we're just here to..." Bard paused a second. "Wait, did you say catapults? You mean..." He scanned the docks for someone. His eyes wet wide as he caught site of what he was looking for. "Onboard!" he shrieked. "Onboard, onboard, onboard!" Bard galloped up the gang plank, and hid among the boxes. The other three ponies looked at each other with expressions of pure confusion. It wasn't till a gravelly voice behind them spoke up that they realized the reason for Bard's unrelenting terror.

"I wasn't done with either of you yet," said Einhorn. "You owe me another day," he said as he pointed to Constance. "And you, Knight; you owe me blood." Ridgeline moved with the swiftness of the breeze, and took a defensive position in front of the mares.

"I suggest you move along, Einhorn," growled Ridgeline. "The Lady Constance is her own mare, and The Lady Heart Chase is none of your concern." Einhorn only chuckled as he lowered his head to charge.

"I think I'll take them both then," he said. "I've never had two ponies at once."

The stallion and the stag crashed into each other with the force of a tidal wave. Einhorn towered over Ridgeline by at least a head, but the earth pony was far more solid, and was at least twice Einhorn's weight. Ridgeline reared back on his back hooves and lashed out with a crashing right hook to Einhorn's sides. The stag winced as the blow connected and sent him staggering. Einhorn came back with a swipe of antler that filled the pony's mouth with blood. It was that taste of salty iron that seemed to lower the temperature of the docks by ten degrees.

Shouting came from other places on the docks as more of Einhorn's crew joined the fray. Heart Chase and Constance ran aboard the Boar's Head in a panic. As the crew frantically struggled to unmoor the boat, the ponies looked back in horror at the unfolding carnage.

Ridgeline's soft grey eyes had gone nearly black. Einhorn swung again at the stallion only to have his horn caught in the pony's teeth. The last thing the stag ever heard was the crunch of his own vertebra. Einhorn was lucky to be dead so he couldn't feel what happened next. Ridgeline shattered through the other attackers, wielding Einhorn's broken body as a club. Zebras and Hamites were tossed aside under the weight to the stag before Ridgeline slammed the corpse to the ground and charged at the other attackers.

The stallion crushed under hoof every single creature that stood in his path. Hamites were sent careening across the docks and into the waters by bone-snapping hooves. Ponies who tried to stab at him with cutlasses or spears had their throats bitten out as if by a lion. Necks snapped as if they

were reeds in the wind beneath his bucks. Ridgeline threw entire crates of cargo atop creatures that weren't even involved in the fight, and plowed through the docks as if he were the vengeance of a forgotten god. In the short minute since the fight started, a dozen bodies lay broken beneath his hooves in a display of unquenchable rage that made a slaughterhouse look like field of daisies. Creatures of every stripe ran in terror from the harbinger of death.

Bard stood up and wrapped his magic around Ridgeline's mind. What he found there was an all consuming bloodlust that he couldn't read past. All he heard was the unholy scream of fury that threatened to consume his sanity. The blacked eyes of the earth pony turned toward the unicorn. He charged at the fleeing boat and leapt across the widening gap between the boat and the charnel house of the docks. He landed on the deck with a braying that sent everypony scrambling in terror. Sparkles of magic wrapped around Ridgeline's head, and he fell asleep. The ponies stood staring in horror at the blood soaked pony that slept upon the deck.

"What the hell was that?" asked Heart Chase. "He just... murdered all those creatures! That wasn't defense; that was a slaughter! My goddess, what happened back there?"

"Berserker," said Bard. He shook his head it fits and spasms. "I've seen it once before, but never in a pony so powerful." He gritted his teeth, and twitched his head again. "It's... the voice of a demon that takes...." He closed an eye, and ground his teeth. "Takes over... and..." He cried out in pain before he dropped to the deck. Heart Chase galloped to Bard; he was panting in pain.

"I'm fine!" he said, pushing her away. "I'm fine. Just... that voice inside his head... It's like something that bores into your soul, and you have to force out." He panted for a moment more before coming to rest. "Poor Ridgeline," he said at last.

"Poor Ridgeline?" asked Constance. "Poor Einhorn! That stag wasn't a kind creature by any stretch of the imagination, but that monster nearly ripped his head off. No pony should be that powerful! He's dangerous. We can't travel with him."

Bard looked at the copper coated pony as he snored on the deck. He was

completely caked in blood, and he had not a scratch on him. Bard only shook his head; it was no wonder Ridgeline's mind seemed simple. There was a demon in there that prevented him from reaching his full potential. Ridgeline wouldn't have been terribly clever anyway, but that... thing inside his head had stunted his growth, and turned him into a monster. Bard only felt pity for the earth pony.

As the river boat sailed north, the deck hands worked around the sleeping pony. After the display on the docks, none wanted to come near him, lest everyone on board wind up dead. The stiff autumn winds propelled the barge through the calmed river as the navigator tacked back and forth across its width. Ricoh spoke on deck with the herd of ponies.

"You'll get that monster off my ship when we hit Bridleburg," said Ricoh. "Else I'll cut his throat as he sleeps, and throw him overboard."

"Ridgeline is harmless unless he gets a taste of blood," said Bard. "He is a simple pony, who only lives to make others happy. It's not his fault he's cursed, and I won't have you trying to kill him for it."

"Fine," said Ricoh. "You are responsible for him. If he so much steps a hoof out of line, he dies. Understood?" Bard nodded. "Now as to passage..."

"Take if off what you owe me," said Bard. "That covers me and Ridgeline." Heart Chase fished out a small sapphire, and presented it to the crimson boar.

"This should cover Constance and me," said Heart Chase. "When can we expect to dock in Bridleburg?"

"Sometime tomorrow afternoon," said Ricoh. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a ship to run." He trotted away, leaving the ponies carry their unconscious companion below deck.

...

It was almost mid day when Red Chase and Quill Pick awoke. The fishing shack was not only warm, but incredibly dark, and the ponies curled up within happily slept their fill. Quill looked outside to see no traces of the pony patrols that had vexed them earlier the previous day. At least

something was going their way.

The duo made their way north along the river's edge toward the Chase Family Farms. It was only another five miles and with the patrols gone, it would only take another hour of hiking to make it there. Though their stomachs rumbled, Quill and Red pressed on. They'd find food at the farm, as well as help and other supplies. They only hoped that the farms were still there to greet them.

They walked with quiet chatter along the river banks, talking about their lives, and how they had spent their childhoods. Quill had spent most of his youth in the mines as all young Picks did. He picked up the business end of things by showing a propensity for math and accounting, and he earned his cutie mark by balancing the books in time for tax season. That was only a year or two before the war started, if he remembered correctly. So much else of his youth had been wrapped up in providing for the war effort. As their father left for the fields of battle, Quill and Silk had stayed behind to run the mines. Every day they shipped ore and gems in great wagon trains to the old capital, and they waited for news from the front. When it was all over, Iron Pick had come home from the castle's last stand, but never spoke of what happened there.

Red Chase took in Quill's history with fascination. Much like herself, he had been forced to grow up in the middle of a war, and take on responsibility one wouldn't expect of fillies and colts of their age. Here they were, the youth of two different wars, separated only by four years time. Quill and his late brother had been forced into adulthood by the coming of the Lunar Rebellion and Red had been catapulted into responsibility by ponies' reaction to the aftermath of that war. They stood at a crossroads now, both figuratively, and literally. Red led Quill north to the hills that surrounded the farm.

Looking down into the valley of the Chase Family farms, they saw graves marked with simple stone placards. In the fields were the ponies who had survived the attack two days before, moving on with their lives as if nothing had happened. Red had been a part of the Chase family long enough to know that when tragedy struck, you simply grit your teeth, and worked through the pain. Work heals all wounds, and if you're exhausted at the end of the day, when are you going to find time to cry? Sentimentality was a right reserved for the elders, of which Red was not.

Red and Quill descended the hills and onto the farm. They ran first in Harvest Moon, a palomino filly who was Red's cousin several times removed. She dropped her scythe and ran into Red's arms.

"My goddess, you're alive!" she said "Sweet, merciful Celestia, be praised! Every pony thought you were dead!" She let go of Red and stepped back. "And Master Quill! I'm so happy to see you alive and well. Oh, it could only be happier if your Aunt Heart were here."

"Don't worry about her," said Red. "She's fine. There's no way she's dead, I know it in my heart. You just keep watchin' the river for her to come back." Harvest Moon nodded, and wiped the tears of joy from her eyes.

"Oh, but we must get you back to the barn!" said Harvest. "A celebration is order, not to mention supper!" Red only shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Cousin Harvest, but we can't," said Red. "We've got to get into town to find Apple Chase and Iron Pick." Harvest Moon looked at them with a skeptical eye for a moment.

"Oh, that's right," said harvest. "You wouldn't have heard. Apple Chase and Iron Pick were married yesterday, and left for the mountains this very morning. Something about bringing home our troops. I only know what rumors go around the tables."

Red cursed under her breath. Glaive was pulling strings faster than she and Quill could gather them. She thanked her cousin and bolted for the dining barn. Quill hurried to keep pace with her, and they were soon greeted by the sweet scents of supper. Red dashed into the kitchen just as the food was finished. Ponies greeted her with shocked gasps and hugs of joy. Red shook off the attention, and grabbed a spare saddle bag.

"I ain't got time," she said as she stuffed tubers and apples into the bags. "I'll explain later, but Quill and I got a war to stop." Quill grabbed up rope and some other bits that other ponies were carrying. They didn't protest as he snatched up gear they would need for the road ahead. "I love you all, and if I don't make it back, tell Heart Chase I love her. Watch the river; she is comin', I can just feel it!" With that, the two ponies galloped away from the dining hall, and toward the city of Bridleburg.

...

The moon hung in low in the sky as the body of Glaive lay silent in the dungeon. His head had been wrapped in a massive iron helm to prevent him from casting spells, and he had been manacled to the wall. The screws in his cuffs had been turned tight to make him suffer. Behind that iron mask was only pain, and a pony that didn't deserve to be there.

Iron Pick had no idea that a pony could be powerful enough to change bodies, but if it was any pony, it would have been Glaive. That soulless bastard had been there at the Castle's when Celestia had banished Nightmare Moon and he had even tried to kill the princess as she wept for her sister. Had it not been for Soul Chase and Star Heart, he might have even succeeded. Iron Pick had been in another room fighting for his life when that happened.

Trapped with only his memories, Iron Pick remembered that night with horror. His detachments of soldiers were the last line of defense against the Lunar Rebels. Nightmare Moon simply shoved the mortal ponies aside to attack her sister, and left the Rebels and Celestia's knights to fight it out amongst themselves. They fought to stand still for felt like an hour as sister clashed with sister behind them. It was Glaive who had broke the line by making one of the shield bearers a puppet. The fight spilled into the throne room. Glaive ran for the sisters but was too late. A rainbow colored burst of magic had vanquished the younger sister to the moon, and left Celestia weeping. Star Heart and Soul Chase broke ranks to save their princess. Iron Pick held the throne room from the onslaught of Lunar Rebels.

There was a cry of pain from the balcony and Celestia's sobbing voice was drowned out by the sounds of battle behind her. Glaive came charging away from Celestia. Iron Pick remembered the fear in his eyes as he sounded the retreat. The Lunar Rebels had been beaten, and Celestia was safe once more. Iron Pick still remembered the last words she spoke to any pony. Some ponies swore that she had said something else to Glaive, Star Heart, and Soul Chase, but to the rest of the ponies in Equestria there was only a simple message. Celestia's final words had been spoken with such dark ferocity that Iron Pick and his soldiers thought the world might split at her hooves. Eight words forever changed how ponies saw their princess.

“I don’t know if I love you anymore.”

No pony had heard from her since. She simply flew away to Canterlot, and sealed herself inside the summer palace. The old capital was abandoned less than a month later. Ponies simply struck out elsewhere. They didn’t want to remember the tragedy that had befallen the two sisters, or the pain that they had caused at the split. The Everfree forest grew from the magic that flowed from the city, and soon it covered Equestria like a disfiguring and cruel scar.

Iron Pick thought back on that night, and how Glaive was sure to try again. No force in Equestria could get through those pearlescent walls. The ponies who had heard Celestia’s muffled words said that she had given the three ponies instructions on how to bring her back. Iron Pick believed it only because Glaive had returned to finish the job. Of the five ponies that were on that balcony, one had been banished to the moon, one has exiled herself, one was dead, one was insane, and the last one hadn’t spoke a word in five years.

Star Heart was the only pony in Equestria who knew how to stop Glaive. Iron Pick as the only pony who knew that and no pony would listen him so long as he was in Glaive’s body.

Chapter 7

Evening of Change

Ridgeline awoke later that evening surrounded by wooden walls. The floor swayed with gentle ease beneath him, and the moist air told him he was aboard a ship of some sort. He had no idea how he had gotten there. The last thing he remembered was taking an antler to the mouth and everything just going dark. He looked down at his coat; it was still stained with the blood of those who had stood in his path. He closed his eyes, and began to weep.

A thump from below deck perked the ears of the crew of the Boar's Head. It was followed by another, then another. It was steady, like the pounding of a mallet on stone. Bard went below deck to investigate; the sound was coming from the room they had stuck Ridgeline in.

Bard trotted down the stairs into the main cargo hold of the barge. At the aft of the ship was a small room, no larger than four ponies wide that was meant as a private quarters of sorts. From that room came the steady pounding that had echoed through the ship's hold. Bard waved open the door to see Ridgeline pounding his head against the hull of the barge. His eyes were closed, and his face was stained with tears.

"What are you doing?" asked Bard.

"How many was it this time?" sobbed Ridgeline. He continued to pound his head on the wall. "How many ponies am I going murder before someone puts me down?" Bard didn't have an answer for that. He only closed the door, and left Ridgeline to his misery. He walked back up the stairs to the inquisitive looks of his traveling companions.

"Ridgeline's awake," he said without bothering to elaborate.

Above deck, the three traveling ponies spoke quietly about what to do once they got to Bridleburg. Given the incident at the docks, it was probably for the best if they stayed away from Hackney Cove for a bit. Heart Chase would have offered them a place to stay at her home, but she wasn't

certain anything was left of the farm, or of Iron Pick's manor. She wasn't even certain she belonged at either one right now.

Truthfully, Heart Chase wasn't terribly worried about what the other ponies decided to do with themselves once they reached Bridleburg. She was far more concerned with finding out what happened to her family. It was nerve wracking to think that everything she had worked her entire life could have been destroyed in just a few days' times. Most importantly, she needed to find out what happened to Red. She knew in her heart that Red was still alive, and that the young mare was out there fighting to make things right. Heart Chase only prayed that she'd be able to help her niece in some way.

...

Red Chase and Quill galloped through the city of Bridleburg toward Pick Manor. A few ponies tried to stop them as they ran, but the two galloped past them as if they were on fire. If Glaive was still with Iron Pick and Apple Chase, then he was still manipulating them from the shadows, and he needed to be stopped. Quill needed to gather his barding from home before they set north. There was a fight coming, and he wanted to be prepared.

The two ponies galloped through the main gate of the manor and along the cobbled walkways that led to the living quarters. Quill and Red blew past a guard who called out for them to wait. They skidded to a halt, and turned to face the guard.

"What is it?" demanded Quill. "My father is in danger."

"Begging your pardon, young master Quill," apologized the earth pony with a bow. "But your father has left for the mountains. He went to go retrieve the army."

"I know that," said Quill. "But he's being controlled by the unicorn that attacked his wedding. Why else would he have married again two days after his wife disappears?"

"What, you mean Glaive?" asked the guard pony. He shook his head with a wry smile. "That bastard's locked up in the dungeon. Would you like to take a poke at him? You can't kill him; Iron Pick's orders. But he said we could make him as miserable as possible, so long as we didn't do any permanent

damage. “

Quill breathed a sigh of relief. Iron Pick knew that the families had to be joined, and since he didn't know that Heart Chase was still alive, he took Apple Chase instead. The second marriage wasn't valid, but it was still a symbol to other ponies that Bridleburg was ready for secession. Quill smiled at their fortune. Somehow, everything had turned out for the best. He turned to his traveling companion.

“Red, I want to thank you,” said Quill. “I'm going to go ‘talk’ to the bastard who killed my brother, and then you and I are going to have a wonderful dinner.” He kissed the young mare's cheek. “You've been a rock throughout this entire ordeal, and I want to thank you properly for being there for me.”

Red's normally yellow cheeks flushed orange at the kiss. She had enjoyed their time together in the woods, and it seemed like the perfect start to a wonderful relationship. The guard led Red to a guest room where she could freshen up while Quill made his way into the catacombs of the manor.

The rattle of keys awoke Iron Pick. He looked up through the iron mask to see the regal silhouette of Quill standing before the bars. On either side, he was flanked by a guard pony that he knew to be loyal to the house. Iron Pick felt his heart leap with joy. That his eldest son was alive brought him all the hope and joy in the world. He stood to greet his son with a smile, though it was hidden behind iron.

It wasn't until his son's hoof crushed his larynx that he realized he was still in Glaive's body. Iron Pick choked and sputtered as he fell to the ground. Quill kicked the sky blue pony in the stomach; the iron mask muffled Iron Pick's strangled cries of protest.

“How does it feel, Glaive?” snarled Quill. “How does it feel to be beaten? To be helpless and frightened like those ponies you murdered my father's wedding?” Quill picked up Glaive from the stone floor of the prison, and slammed him into the wall.

“I would give anything to kill you here and now. My brother deserves vengeance for what you've done.” Quill threw Glaive to the ground; the iron helm clattered against the floor like the ringing of a church bell. “But it's not

my place. No, I shall give that pleasure to my father, for it was his son that you murdered.” Quill spit on the coughing pony; the spittle landed on his crescent moon cutie mark. “I’ll see you hang, you miserable piece of filth.”

Quill left the cage to the guard ponies that had been standing by. They again manacled the beaten pony to the wall to let him to suffer in silence. Iron Pick had to smile despite the pain in his throat and ribs. His son had returned, alive and unharmed. He only prayed that he would be able to speak before he left and warn him of the Glaive’s treachery.

...

Ridgeline eventually made his way onto the deck of the barge after beating his head into a wall for an hour. True to Bard’s previous observation, the only marks on his face were a bruise, and weary sadness. The earth pony looked over the side of the barge, and considered throwing himself over it. At the bottom of the Dame River, he couldn’t hurt any pony. He couldn’t lose control and murder anyone who dared be in his presence. It was the voice of Bard that brought him back from his thoughts of despair.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m not really a knight,” said Ridgeline. Bard looked at him with a confused expression. Had he heard right? “I was in the army for a while, and I even made it halfway through the knight’s training until I lost control one day. I killed thirteen of Celestia’s best warriors. After that, they sent me in a cage to the front lines of every battle, hoping that some pony would eventually put me down.” He shook his head. “Two years of fighting later, the war was over, and there was no place for a pony like me in Equestria.” He looked back to the sky blue unicorn. “They dumped me in the Everfree forest to live with the rest of the monsters. I guess I should have stayed there.” He looked back down at the deck. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

“I heard the voice of the demon in your head,” said Bard. “It nearly drove me mad; I can’t even imagine what it’s done to you over the years.” Bard put a hoof to Ridgeline’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I’ve been such a prick to you. What you’ve had to deal with is so far beyond what any pony should have to endure.” Bard’s caught sight of Ridgeline’s eyes. They had returned from black to their normal sad grey, but they were still lined with the regret of failure.

"I want to help you, Ridgeline," said Bard. "I haven't helped any pony but myself since the war's end, and I think it's time to change that. We can work together to save you from yourself. Once we make it to Bridleburg, we'll travel together. See the world. Leave Equestria and its madness behind. I know some hot to trot mares in the Zebra lands that would just love to get their hooves on you. You ever been with a zebra mare? You have no idea what you're missing, my friend." Ridgeline only shook his head sadly.

"I can't be trusted," he said. "What if..."

"Don't worry about the 'what ifs'," said Bard. "You're talking to one of the best mages in Equestria. The Great and Powerful Bardiche doesn't let bullshit like demons get in his way, and you shouldn't either." He clapped a hoof on Bard's shoulder. "Come on, let's get you cleaned up. We can't have you go waltzing into town looking like a charnel house."

In the cargo hold below, Heart Chase had just laid her head to rest on a fresh pile of straw when she felt the soft, feathery embrace of a pegasus wing wrap around her. She looked up to see that Constance had plopped down beside her. The familiar and tantalizing scent of licorice brought Heart Chase from tired back to completely awake.

"T... there are other places to sleep," she stammered. "Yah don't have to keep me warm tonight."

"Oh, but I want to." Constance purred and nuzzled Heart Chase with a wistful sigh. "It's so infrequent that I get to spend any time with mares. The female companionship at Hackney Cove leaves much to be desired. It's just so pleasant to spend time with an actual pony, rather than boars, or zebras." She smiled at the yellow earth pony. "I'm sure you know the feeling. It's so sad how we're moving away from families sharing the same pile for warmth. Why, soon, we'll all have our own rooms, and where will that leave us?"

"Yah... just like bein' close to other mares?" asked Heart Chase. She worried that she sounded too hopeful.

"Why of course dear," said the rose coated pegasus. "Who doesn't? Mares

won't wake you up in the middle of the night for a roll in the hay, so to speak. And it's just so nice to be able share the warmth and comfort of a bed without being on the clock." Constance turned to Heart Chase with a concerned smile. "Oh, dear; I'm not making you uncomfortable am I?" Heart Chase completely failed to hide her flush embarrassment.

"No, yer fine," she said with a nervous laugh. "Just... like you said, nothin' like spendin' time with ponies who don't expect nothin' outta yah." Constance laid her head on Heart Chase's shoulder, and fell into a peaceful sleep. Heart Chase made the best of it, and wrapped an arm around Constance. She might as well enjoy the company while it was around.

...

"Children of Bridleburg, hear me!" called the Iron Pick. The troops of the camp came to a quiet, and turned to face their commander. "For nearly a century, the Bridleburg Valley has been ignored! Maligned! Mistreated under the oppressive hooves of our tyrant princess Celestia. This ends tonight!"

Cheers and stomping of a thousand armored hooves filled the grassy mountain valley. As far as the eye could see, ponies stood in the glimmering steel armor of the Bridleburg valley. The shipments of iron that had been flowing from Bridleburg to the mountains had been forged into plates of rebellion that adorned the flanks of each and every pony that had come here. They had come as farmers and miners, and they would leave this valley as soldiers. They stood in rapt attention as Iron Pick orated to them the importance of family, and their reasons for secession.

"Do we do this because we want power?" asked Iron Hoof. "Do we do this because we are greedy? Because we are vain? No, my children, I say to you that we do this because we deserve it! How long have we shipped our gems and minerals to into the uncaring hooves of the old capital and now to Canterlot? How long will we wait for an absent goddess to deign to speak to us once more? The ponies of the capital seek to rest power from her hooves, and give it to themselves. Should we allow the lazy bureaucrats of Canterlot to siphon off the blood and sweat of the hardworking ponies of Bridleburg? I SAY NEIGH!"

Wild clopping echoed again through the valley, as the ponies threw their hooves into the air and called for revolution. Glaive looked down on his crowd of soldiers with a wide smile. His father's madness had sparked the Lunar Rebellion; now it was his duty to end the reign of Celestia. Five years ago, he had run in terror from the Princess's words. Now, he would forge those words into a sword and pierce her heart with them. After that, it was a matter of waiting for the stars to aid in the true queen's escape, but that was a problem for another generation.

Glaive left crowd of cheering soldiers to return to his tent. Waiting for him was an orange earth mare wearing the armor of Celestia's Knights. Glaive nodded to her, and the pony followed into the tent. Waiting for him in the canvas tent was pegasus adorned in the blue plates of the Lunar Rebels, another earth pony clad in the shimmering steel of Bridleburg, and Apple Chase. To ponies that saw it, they would have guessed it was a peace conference.

"I apologize for my unseemly appearance," said Glaive. "This body is old, yet powerful in the respect that it commands. Once we are finished with Celestia's army, I shall be free to be myself again." He looked around the table at the gathered conspirators. "For those of you who do not know, this is my new wife, Apple Chase. Without her, none of this would have been possible." Apple Chase bowed to the gathered ponies, and they bowed back. "On to business then. Fillies and gentlecolts, your reports, please." The blue clad pegasus stepped forward.

"The remnants are positioned in the Everfree forest, ready to join the Bridleburg army on their march to Canterlot," said the Pegasus. "Scouts report that the army is near the old capital now. If Daisy Lane will confirm?"

"I'm happy to report that Hoof Beats is correct," said the mare Knight. "The goal was to reach the old capital by this evening, and make camp there. I have a messenger dragon waiting there with an ally to relay positions to General Carmel Snack."

"We will target the officers of the Celestian Knights to break moral, and incite panic," said the other earth Pony. "Bridleburg's troops have been trained to identify their distinct armor, and to seek them out in battle. Because they expect troops to fight troops, and officers to fight officers, they won't see it coming. Once their moral is broken, we can expect to follow

retreat to Canterlot.”

“They will set up ambushes through the forest,” said Daily Lane. “But between Hoof Beat’s scouts and my contacts, we should be able to keep ahead of them, and minimize losses to Bridleburg troops.”

“After that,” said Hoof Beats, “It will be a simple matter to take Canterlot. Stalliongrad forces are enroute to the capital as we speak. Both armies should converge on the city in six days.” The pegasus paused a moment, as he tried to careful word his next question. “Sir, if I may be so bold...”

“You’re wondering about Celestia,” said Glaive. “Don’t worry about her. Nightmare Moon told me how to defeat her five years ago. It’s quite the bit of poetic justice, I have to say. Have our troops found Star Heart?”

“No, sir,” replied Daisy Lane. “The Celestian Knights haven’t seen or heard from him since the banishment. When he left the castle, it’s like he disappeared from the face of Equestria.”

“Well if we can’t find him, then he’s no threat,” said Glaive. “Who would dare to stand in our way now? No, my friends, tonight we stand at the precipice of a new world order; a New Lunar Republic for our goddess. Praise to Nightmare Moon.”

“Praise to Nightmare Moon,” echoed the ponies with bowed heads.

...

A strong headwind had brought the Boar’s Head to the Bridleburg docks far ahead of schedule. It was early the next morning when the sounds of crew mooring the ship along the banks of Bridleburg awoke the four passenger ponies. Heart Chase and the others walked up stairs to find Ricoh arguing with one of the Pick family guard ponies. Apparently the plan had changed, and the catapults needed to be delivered further up river. Ricoh protested until he was offered further compensation for his time. He saw the ponies coming up the stairs.

“Well, this is where you get off,” said the crimson boar. “Apparently, they need these catapults further north than they said. Luckily, they’re paying me double to deliver them, so what the heck, eh?”

"Thank yah, Captain," said Heart Chase. "It's been good sailing with you."

"Eh, you're welcome," replied the boar with a flippant wave. "No trouble at all; pleasure to meet you, Missus Chase." He turned to the other ponies. "Bard, you keep that beast of yours under control, and Miss Constance..." He only smiled at the pegasus.

"Next time, captain," she said with a wink. "Thank you so much."

The ponies walked from the barge to the dock. Aside from the guard, who had wandered off, there was no pony there. Heart Chase looked to the city, then back to her farm. Torn between two equally important destinations, she fished into her satchel for a bit. She flipped the gold coin into the air, and watched it spin. It landed in the grass, and Luna's face smiled back from the grass.

"Luna," she said. "That means we go to Bridleburg first." She looked back down at the coin for a moment before putting it back in her satchel. "Funny, I thought all those old bits got melted down."

The four ponies walked in tired silence toward the Pick manor. From there, Heart Chase would be able to determine who was still missing, and what had happened in the three days since she had been swept out to sea. Hopefully it was as simple as a raiding party, but a feeling of unease told her that it had probably been something far more insidious. Constance noticed a chill running up the yellow mare's spine.

"Cold again dear?" asked the pegasus. "It's always warm under my wings, if you need."

"Thank yah, no," said Heart Chase. "I'm not cold, just worried that everything's gone all pear shaped on me while I was gone. I dunno, maybe I'm just paranoid."

"Never attribute to malice that which can be attributed to basic inadequacy," said Bard. "I'm sure even Ridgeline could tell you that."

"What does malice mean?" asked the copper coated stallion. Bard only shook his head.

“At any rate, what happened that you wound up on that ship anyway?” he asked. “You never have told us.” Heart Chase looked back at her traveling companions a moment.

“The truth is a bit hard to explain,” she said. “And I don’t mean to sound like a prickly pear, but I don’t know if I can trust you just yet. Yah see; I got attacked on my wedding day by some Lunar Rebels.” Bard’s face went white, and his normally boisterous voice went timid.

“L...lunar Rebels?” he said. “Here?”

“Well it sure doesn’t look like they stayed around,” said Heart Chase. “I imagine if they did, we’d be forelock deep in ‘em by now.” She looked around the city. “And I don’t see any.”

They walked deeper into the city, coming off the dirt paths outside the town to the cut stone cobbles of Bridleburg proper. Were it not four in the morning, the streets would be bustling with ponies plying their trades, or making deals to export the vast wealth of Bridleburg elsewhere. As it was, the streets were empty and the single story stone buildings of Bridleburg sat as silent monuments to the great industry that lay beneath their hooves. They came at last to Pick manor, where Heart Chase paused to catch her breath. She had been coming here regularly for months now, but every time she came, she had to marvel at manor.

The manor took up most of the northern end of Bridleburg. With its high limestone walls, and fields of green, it felt more like a castle than a manor. Every pony who had believed in the dream of an independent Bridleburg thought it was befitting of future royalty. Marble statues of past Picks adorned the walkways toward the main manor, and small stone monuments to those less important were scattered along the path. Even the cobblestone had been etched with names of remembrance, and of those ponies that had died in mine accidents. The grounds were a memorial to excellence and the importance of family, but they also served as a reminder to press on no matter the circumstances. The four ponies were halfway to the manor house before they were stopped by a guard.

“Lady Heart Chase!” said the guard pony. “Celestia be praised, you’re alive!”

“Well, I’m sorry to have worried everypony,” she said with a guilty smile. “How is everypony else? Where is Iron Pick? What happened to Apple Chase? Or Red? Or Quill?” The guard pony looked away with a nervous glance.

“Um, begging your pardon, M’lady,” replied the guard. “I don’t think I’m the pony to tell you. Perhaps Master Quill should explain?”

“Thank you,” said Heart Chase. “I’ll find his room, thank yah. Please send a runner to Chase Family Farms and let them know I’m alive and well.” She looked back to her companions. “And prepare rooms for my guests. I wouldn’t be here without them.” The guard pony bowed.

“Yes, m’lady,” he said, and galloped off toward the manor house. Constance looked at Heart Chase with an eye of suspicion.

“I thought you said you were a farmer?” she said. Heart Chase replied with a smile.

“I married up.”

The four travelers walked around the side of the manor house to the private quarters of the Pick family. At the end of the hall was Iron Pick and Heart Chase’s rooms, but the door she was interested in was right in center of the limestone hallway. Heart Chase gently knocked on the door. There was a groan of complaint, and the shuffling of hooves before the door opened to reveal an extraordinarily tired and worn out Quill Pick. He blinked a few times at Heart Chase’s smiling face before he parsed together just who was standing in front of him. His eyes snapped open.

“Heart Chase!” he cried, and wrapped his hooves around her. “My goddess, I’m so happy to see you alive.”

“I’m glad to see you’re alive as well,” said Heart Chase as she returned the hug. “What of everypony else? Have yah heard from Red?”

“Red?” he asked nervously. “Uh, yeah, she’s... uh... good and I... uh...”

“Who is that?” ask Red Chase. Quill’s smile shifted from that of exuberance

to unbridled terror in a single moment as Red emerged from the bedroom. She rubbed her eyes a moment before realizing her aunt stood before her, alive and in one piece. Red dashed to her aunt, and threw her arms around her. "I knew you were alive! I just knew it!" she cried. "I hadn't even dared hope that I'd see you again so soon. Oh my goddess, there's so much to tell you!"

"Such as why you're sharing a bedroom with a stallion four years your elder?" asked Heart Chase in the sort of tone one would use to deliver a death sentence. "And you, Quill." She stared down the much larger stallion with a glare that would shatter stone. "I expected better of yah then to take advantage of my neice."

"I...it's not like that at all!" stammered Quill, as he tried to back away. "We haven't done anything! I swear!" He covered his face with his hooves. "Pleasedon'tkillme."

"Auntie Heart!" scolded Red. "I'm a grown mare! I can make my own decisions about who I spend the night with." She huffed at her aunt. "And beside, he's asked me to marry him."

"Where is your sense of honor, sir?" asked Ridgeline. "Have you no code?"

"I'm sorry, who are you?" asked Quill. He looked at the massive stallion, then to the other ponies behind Heart Chase. The rose colored pegasus smiled at him. The sky blue unicorn with the crescent moon cutie mark only blinked. Quill's expression shifted from fear to rage in a split second as he launched himself at Bard.

The ponies toppled to the lawn as Quill rained blows upon Bard. The unicorn was too stunned to do anything but cover his face. Ridgeline grabbed Quill in his teeth and threw him back into the room. Heart Chase got between the two before Quill could jump back up to attack.

"How the hell did you get out of the dungeon?" snarled Quill. "And why is Glaive following you, Heart Chase?" The mare only blinked.

"Glaive?" asked Bard. "Mother of Luna, you have Glaive in a dungeon?"

"That bastard murdered my brother," spat Quill. "Who are you? Why are

you following Heart?" Bard only stared at the ponies in terror.

"My name is Bard," he replied. "And I sincerely doubt you have my brother in your captivity."

Chapter 8

Understanding the Monster

The door of Iron Pick's cell clattered open again. He looked up through his iron mask to see a mirror image of the body he was currently occupying. The unicorn was flanked by his son, his new wife, and two other ponies he had never seen before. The unicorn stepped in, and Quill closed the door behind him.

Bard approached his brother's body with caution. If it was really him, and he took off that mask, then he was in just as much danger as he could ever be. But if his suspicions were correct, an innocent pony was being punished in his stead. It wouldn't have been the first time Glaive had done that. Bard unlocked the hinges with a wave of his horn, and the helm clattered to the ground.

Behind the mask was the beaten face of a unicorn. Bruises and cuts lined his face where the mask had chaffed. He shared the face of a monster, but the yellow eyes were full of worry, and not malice. This wasn't Glaive; this was another pony.

"Where is Glaive?" asked Bard.

"He has my body," said Iron Pick. "Quill! My son! It's me, your father. Please, let me see you." Bard read the unicorn's thoughts as he called out to his son.

"He's telling the truth," said Bard. He looked out at the moon from the cell. "Damn him, what has he done this time? What's he after?" With another wave of his horn, he released the manacles from Iron Pick, and opened the door. Quill watched the scene unfold with a skeptical eye.

"Prove it," said Quill. "What's something only my father would know?"

"I know your cutie mark is for writing," said Iron Pick. "I can still remember every single letter you wrote to me while I was away at war. You always ended them the same: 'Stay safe, Dad.' "

Quill cringed at the words. He had written them every time he had sent a letter. Of the four ponies that had seen those letters, two of them had since passed. Quill fell to a knee and bowed before his father.

"I'm sorry, father," he said. "I didn't know." Iron Pick only shook his head, and put a hoof on Quill's shoulder.

"Your devotion to your brother is admirable," he said. "And you showed far more restraint than I would have. It is forgotten, son." He turned to Heart Chase. "And as for you, my lovely wife..."

"How...?" she stammered. "How did this Glaive pony take your body?" Iron Pick only shook his head. He was too exhausted to even think straight. Quill supported his father as they left the cell.

"I don't know," said Iron Pick. "He supposedly went north to the..." Iron Pick paused, and looked at the ponies surrounding him. "Is it safe to take with these ponies here?" Heart Chase looked at Ridgeline, Constance, and Bard. She honestly didn't know how they would react. Better to play it safe.

"Allow me to put my guests up before we start speaking," said Heart Chase. She leaned in to whisper into Iron Pick's ear. "And start thinking of something else. Perhaps a child's song. The unicorn can read thoughts."

Quill escorted his father away as Heart Chase escorted the other ponies to a large guest suite. The inside had been prepared by the servants to the exacting standards of dignitaries, or visiting nobility. The common ponies were nearly overwhelmed by the display of fine fruits, soft linens, and classical sculptures. A personal servant had been assigned to the three for their stay. The earth pony bowed to her guests.

"Allow me to draw baths for you all," she said. "I'm certain you can use them after a hard day's travel. And I want to thank you for bringing back Lady Heart Chase. You have no idea what she means to the Bridleburg valley." As the servant pony catered to the needs of the travelers, Red, Iron Pick, Heart Chase, and Quill convened in Iron Pick's office.

The office was a masterwork of granite walls and statues. The pick symbol that had graced the flank of generation after generation had been etched

into the stone as a reminder to all who passed through here that they were the heirs to a legacy of service to family. It made Heart Chase think of her own family, and how much she desperately missed them. As Quill explained what he had learned, it dawned on Heart Chase that her sister was in the hooves of a maniac. Apple Chase didn't know Iron Pick as well perhaps she should have, and any uncharacteristic behavior would go unnoticed. Heart Chase pushed the thoughts of worry out of her head. Apple Chase was a smart mare and she'd know how to escape a pony like Glaive if it came to that.

Something else bothered her though. While Apple Chase belittled her husband, she always assumed that they loved each other. If he was dead, then she would have mourned him for at least a little while before getting married, right? I mean, they all knew what was at stake, but it was highly improper, and obvious that the marriage was political. It lacked the subtlety of the Heart Chase's and Iron Pick's union. Something wasn't adding up, but she couldn't put her hoof on it.

"So Glaive is taking the army," said Iron Pick. "Instead of bringing them to Bridleburg to defend the city, he takes them east into the forest to fight Celestia's Knights head on." He tapped his head with a hoof as he tried to think. "If he's on the same quest he was five years ago, then we know he's going to try to take Canterlot. He's not interested in an independent Bridleburg; he wants all of Equestria for Nightmare Moon." Iron Pick started pacing as he thought aloud. "But he can't take Canterlot with just our forces. He's planning something else, and I think it's to assassinate Celestia."

"And how would he go about doing that?" asked Heart Chase. "No pony has seen her in five years, and nothing can get through the walls." Iron Pick turned to look at the orange maned mare.

"There's something," he said. "I don't know what it is, but Celestia gave instructions on how to call her when the fighting had ended. I was there when Nightmare Moon was banished, but I didn't hear what she said. There are only two ponies alive who know what she said and one of them is Glaive."

"Who's the other?" asked Red Chase.

“His name is Star Heart,” said Iron Pick. “He used to live in Hoofswell, but he hasn’t spoken to any pony since hearing Celestia’s message. I don’t even know if he’s still alive.” Iron Pick looked at his desk in despair. “I’m really at a loss here. We can’t possibly get there in time; it’s nearly nine hundred miles away.”

Heart Chase thought back to the coastline and how Bard had bragged endlessly about his magical prowess. What had he said about teleportation? No, it wasn’t Bard, it was Ridgeline who had said that it was a full on ceremonial magic. She pounded a hoof on the desk.

“Bard can teleport us,” she said at last. “At least, he said he could. I don’t know if he really can, but it ‘s worth a shot.”

“Can this Bard be trusted?” asked Quill. “I mean, Glaive is his brother after all. Who knows if they’re working together?” Heart Chase thought for a minute. What else had he said? Something about slavery.

“No, he said he was Kin of Luna,” said Heart Chase. “I can’t imagine pretending to be one of them if you’re not. He seemed so proud of it, as if it were something special to belong to a group of mules and...” She paused a moment to consider what she was saying. She hadn’t known any mules or donkeys; why was she passing judgment on them so quickly? “At any rate, he doesn’t seem like his brother at all. He’s a loud mouth, and a bit of a show off, but he’s not evil, and he doesn’t want to hurt anypony.” Iron Pick considered all this for a minute. There really wasn’t another option, though he hated to draw a third party into this affair.

“We’ll discuss it after dawn,” said Iron Pick. The four ponies turned to see the sun creeping over the horizon. Iron Pick sighed, and hung his head. “Alright, after breakfast then.”

...

“There’s no way under Luna’s merciful moon that I am chasing after my brother,” said Bard. “When last we saw each other, he told me he’d kill if he saw me again. Glaive is a stallion of his word, and I’d prefer to remain alive, thank you.” Bard pushed aside his bowl of fruit; he had lost his appetite.

“Don’t you care at all about Celestia?” asked Red Chase. “Glaive’s gonna

kill her, and you won't lift a hoof to stop him?"

"I don't care about her. I look after me, myself, and I," said Bard. He looked to the copper coated earth pony who stood beside him. "And Ridgeline. Somepony's got to look out for that lummox." Ridgeline shot an annoyed expression at the unicorn.

"We don't need yah to face down Glaive," said Heart Chase "We need yah to take us to Hoofswell so we can find Star Heart."

"And then where?" asked Bard. "Maybe to Canterlot? Or Stalliongrad? Maybe we can all go to the Zebra territories!" He put up his hooves in a gesture of defeat. "The point is, Equestria's become a dangerous place in the past few years. Too dangerous for a coward like me." He pointed a hoof at Ridgeline. "Bottom line, I'm going with him. He's a scary berserker. I'm the second best mage in Equestria, and one of the only ponies who can help him. It's like a match made in heaven."

"I will accompany you, m'lady," said Ridgeline. "I am honor bound to uphold the will of our goddess, even if she no longer wishes to see us."

"Celestia is gone! Forget about her!" shrieked Bard. "Worry about yourself for a change; you're not even really a Knight! There's a whole world of mares and booze and experiences out there, and you're willing to just ignore it for a goddess who doesn't care anymore?"

"I know she still cares," said Constance. Everypony turned to look at the pegasus, who had otherwise been silent then entire meal. "Look at what's happened in the past seven years. We went from peace loving ponies to war mongers. It used to be you could travel the breadth of Equestria and be greeted with friendly smiles and open arms at every turn." She looked down at her breakfast, and pushed it away.

"When I was a filly, I used to ride in the caravans and make friends everywhere we went. I shared friendship with ponies I'd never see again just because we made each other smile. I remember all their names, their faces, and their cutie marks. Before the war, friendship was everywhere. We had an army, sure, but it they served ponies in times of disaster, they didn't go around killing ponies like they do now." She looked back up at the gathered ponies. "She does care; she just doesn't want us to fight

anymore.”

The table fell silent at the pegasus’s words, as they considered their lives before the war.

Iron Pick had served for twenty years in Knights reserves before he ever saw combat.

Heart Chase, Constance, and Quill had all spent a decade in carefree innocence before the war had come.

Bard had spent his entire teen years entertaining before joining the Lunar Rebellion.

Red Chase almost didn’t remember a world without war.

Ridgeline couldn’t remember when he had ever stopped fighting.

The stinging realization of just how much every pony in Equestria had failed to live up to the expectations of their goddess hung over the breakfast table like a cloud. The sisters had represented everything that ponies were supposed to be: brave and strong as the earth ponies, wise and magical as the unicorns, and as swift and clever as the pegasi. Though they were day and night, they loved each other, and they loved their subjects. Until Nightmare Moon came along, the sisters were the shining examples of harmony that Equestria looked up to. Now that they were gone, there was nothing to guide them. Ponies had lost their way without their goddess, and descended into madness. It was Bard who finally broke the silence.

“You can’t believe that stopping Glaive will end the violence in Equestria,” he said. “There’s always ponies out there looking for power; those who are willing to go to war for a bigger piece of the pie.” He looked up at Iron Pick and Heart Chase with a cold glare, as if he knew their secret. “I’ll take you to Hoofswell. I’ll help you find your pony, and I’ll bring you home. But I expected to be paid. Handsomely. If I do this, it’s not for you. It’s for the Luna that I loved before she became the monster that I feared.” Bard walked away from the table. “I need to gather my things. I’ll meet you in the courtyard at noon.”

The meal ended with that statement, and the guest ponies wandered off to

gather their possessions. The family gathered back in Iron Pick's office and stood in silent contemplation for a while. After a minute, Heart Chase spoke up.

"I don't want this anymore," she said. "I don't want to fight. I don't want war. I just want peace. Look at the world that Red has grown up in. It's been one war after another. My goddess, we really have lost our way, haven't we?"

"It's already done," said Iron Pick. "We can't stop Glaive from marching on Canterlot, but we can prevent him from winning. Star Heart will know how to bring Celestia back." He looked at the globe on his desk a moment. Equestria spanned a great portion of their continent, and was home to ponies of all stripes. "I think once Equestria sees her again, the fighting will stop. Ponies won't want to secede anymore. Isn't that why we started this revolution? Because we lost our faith?"

Those were the words that struck home for everypony. Nightmare Moon's curse hadn't just torn apart a family of goddesses; it had torn apart the very souls of the ponies. No longer carefree and happy, the years of war and their lack of goddess had caused them to lose their faith, not only in Celestia and Luna, but in each other. Without at least one of them to guide them, Equestria had fallen to pieces.

"That's it then," said Heart Chase. "If we want Equestria back, we have to bring back Celestia. We started a war, and we helped that monster along the way. It's gotta be us that stops him."

"There's a problem with that," said Iron Pick. "I can't go like this. Star Heart will kill me on sight if he sees me in this body. The face of an enemy like Glaive is one you don't forget." He pounded a hoof on his desk in frustration. "Damnit! I can't send you out there."

"Not just you," said Constance. The ponies turned to look at the pegasus as she entered the office. "We're going with you."

"What do you mean we?" asked Heart Chase.

"I mean the four of us," said Constance. "Ridgeline, Bard, you, me. This isn't the sort of thing you take on alone. You're going to need help."

“I don’t even know you ponies!” said Heart Chase. “Yah been followin’ me around for three days now, and I still don’t know if I can trust yah. The only reason I’d take Bard anywhere is cause he’s the one with the magic. Ridgeline is an accident waitin’ to happen, and you...” her tone softened, and she blushed. “Well, yah sure are nice to spend time with, I’ll give yah that, but this ain’t none of yer concern, and I won’t have yah riskin’ yer pretty feathers cleanin’ up my mess.” Constance shook her head.

“Have you ever been to Hoofswell?” asked Constance. “It’s a very different place than Bridleburg. They’re not too trusting of strangers there, and you’d stick out like a sore thumb. You need a guide and who better than a pony that was born there? You need Ridgeline for that. And if he goes, I go. Bard’s not going to leave him behind, and someone’s got to be a good influence on him.”

Heart Chase blinked a moment at the revelation. Constance was right. Heart Chase hadn’t spent much time outside of Bridleburg, and as far as she was concerned, Hoofswell might as well been another planet. She hadn’t considered that the rest of Equestria might be different from home.

“What about us?” asked Quill.

“You’re stayin’ here,” said Heart Chase. “Our families need yah. They ain’t gonna trust some pony who says he’s Iron Pick, but looks like a terrorist. And with Apple Chase gone, some pony’s gonna have to run the farm.” Heart Chase looked at the two ponies. “We’re headed into a war zone, and there’s a good chance none of us are gonna come back. Some pony’s got be in charge around here, and you two are the only ones we can trust.” She looked finally to Iron Pick. “This is what I gotta do if I’m gonna keep my family safe. I got the chance to stop Glaive and make Equestria safer for everypony. I can’t let that pass.”

Iron Pick looked at Heart Chase for a moment before speaking. Something was clearly going through his head, and everypony knew it was important. They waited in silence for him to speak.

“May I have a word alone with my wife?” he asked.

The ponies nodded, and shuffled from the office. Behind them, the door closed with a click. Iron Pick stared at Heart Chase a moment before

hanging his head.

“I want you to know that I think the world of you,” said Iron Pick. “And I know that our marriage was never about anything other than a bid for power. But I admire you, Heart Chase. You share your father’s dedication to your family.”

Iron Pick levitated a scroll from his desk, and began writing. Heart Chase stood quiet as he wrote, trying to read his sloppy handwriting. He dipped his quill again, and with a flourish, he signed the letter. The scroll was placed in a metal tube, and sealed with magic.

“If you do manage to bring our princess back, give her this,” said Iron Pick. “I’m not going to pretend to have authority over you, nor am I the sort of pony who makes demands of my wife, but the only thing I will ever ask of you is that you do not allow anyone but the princess to open this case. Don’t worry about what’s inside; just don’t try to open it.”

Heart Chase nodded quietly and looked into Iron Pick’s eyes. Inside of them was a calm resignation that worried Heart Chase for reasons she couldn’t quite understand. Though the stallion that stood before her had a different body, inside he was still Iron Pick. She leaned across the desk and kissed his cheek.

“A mare could really fall for yah,” she said with a sad smile. “You’ve always put your family ahead of yerself, and I’m just glad to be part of it now.” She picked up the scroll case, and put it in her satchel. “I’ll come back, I promise. Maybe we can make this work after all.”

“Maybe we can,” said Iron Pick. “We’ll see.”

The next few hours were filled with packing and preparation. Ridgeline had been fitted with the bronze barding of Celestia’s Knights to protect him from a blood rage. Constance had gathered blankets and cold weather gear for the herd, and Heart Chase secured to other supplies they would need for a long trip north.

Bard stood atop the compass rose that adorned the courtyard’s walkway. Candles carved with glyphs had been placed at points of the compass, and charcoal runes had been drawn in a circle around the center. Bard stepped

back and looked at his handiwork for a moment. At any other time, he would have been pleased as punch at such an opportunity to show off his magic. Now, he was just getting paid to be a ferry. He put away his tools, and looked to the noon sky. It was time to get moving.

The ponies made their way into the courtyard. They marveled at Bard's work, and asked questions about the various glyphs and runes he had drawn upon. He ignored the questions for the most part.

"So who's coming?" asked Bard.

"Looks like it's the four of us," said Heart Chase. "What do we need to do?" Bard looked over the four ponies a moment, and paused to think.

"Constance, you're from Stalliongrad, right?" The rose coated pegasus nodded. "Please stand on the East point. Ridgeline, since you're from Hoofswell, and that's where we're headed, stand on the N."

"The what?" asked the copper coated stallion.

"The 'N'!" said Bard. "'N! Can't you rea... uh... right there at the top. Yeah." He turned to Heart Chase. "You're from Bridleburg right?"

"Born and raised," she said. "I guess that makes me the west."

"And I'll take the south," said Bard. "Alright everypony, I need you to relax. Clear your minds of thoughts. The only pony who needs to be thinking right now is Ridgeline." He looked across the compass at the armored stallion. "Alright Ridgeline; think of a place in Hoofswell that you know really well." Ridgeline furrowed his brow and concentrated as hard as he could. "Got it? Now imagine that place around you. Close your eyes and feel it. The smells, the sounds, everything about it you can remember."

Ridgeline remembered his family's home. He remembered the low ceilings, and sloping walls; how the unfinished stone floor felt beneath his hooves as he grew up. The scent of his home came back to him: turnips and greens. For a moment, he was lost in a memory of home he had been taken away from all those years ago. Bard read the thought, and finished his spell. The world swirled around him. Equestria tilted away as if moving a hoof on a

map and with a flash of purest white light, the four ponies disappeared from Bridleburg.

Chapter 9

Northern Lights

With a flash of white light, four ponies appeared in the shell of the home. The walls had been scorched black by the heat of flames and an outline of the compass that had brought them here traced itself in the cinders upon the floor. Ash stirred in swirls as the air around them changed pressures, and swept through the snow.

Outside the shattered windows of the home, snow piled upon the ground that lay only inches below their head. Because the building had been dug into the earth, the stone and dirt roof remained, though it did so with the black of ashes. Ridgeline looked around for a moment and hung his head. He had remembered his home as it used to be, not as how it was when he had left it. Where the front door should have been there was only a melted hinge. Ridgeline walked outside the remnants of his house to greet what remained of his home town.

The chill of the northern winds blew through the ponies as if it were it were a malevolent spirit waiting to drag them to an icy grave. Constance unpacked the winter cloaks she had taken from Pick's home, and passed them among the ponies. Ridgeline only stared out at his city; he didn't even react to the offered clothing. Memories of the tragedy of Hoofswell played back in his mind. He remembered looking to the sky, and asking Celestia why she had let this happen. He always wondered if he'd return; now he remembered why he never had. As if instinct was leading him to where he needed to go, Ridgeline started walking along the snow covered paths. In truth there was nothing in Hoofswell but the old ponies that refused to leave, and that waited to die.

All around the herd were the shells of a once beautiful city. Stained glass depictions of the goddesses hung half-shattered in frames in of windows that had once sang with life. The homes, like the rest of the city, were now silent, save for the howling of the winds that ripped through the streets like a pack of coyotes. Scorched walls thrust out in black spikes from the perfect white piles of snow as if to guide the ponies along a path to nowhere.

The ponies walked in silence through the snow filled streets. It seemed more than a ruin, it felt more like a graveyard of unquiet dead that would rise up in wrath for daring to disturb them. Everywhere there were signs of the life that had been abandoned in an instant: Carts lay toppled and frozen to the ground; merchandise sat rusting in shop windows, skeletons of those fallen griffins lay covered in ice and snow.

A foal's toy lay buried in a shop window. It had been protected from the ravages of time by a piece of broken glass that lay atop it. Ridgeline stopped to pick it up; it was a rabbit. The stuffed toy was covered in ice, but it held together as if it wanted to be found again. Its stitched smile had come frayed long ago, and a single button eye hung from its face. Ridgeline looked at the toy rabbit in his hooves, then back out to the city.

"I was born here," said Ridgeline. "That was fifteen years ago, but it might as well been never for all that's left of it." Sitting in the snow, the massive stallion cradled the stuffed bunny in his arms as if it were real. He pet the toy as the memories of that day came back. "All this destruction happened when I was about six. Griffons swept in from the north and dropped balls of fire from the sky. Every pony here fought, but we weren't warriors back then. We were just rock farmers. There never were that many pegasi in the city, and they couldn't hold the skies against so many griffons." Ridgeline was staring into the distance as the events of those days played back in his head. "They killed so many. No one knew why. They just came, destroyed our city, and left. They didn't loot. They didn't take prisoners. They bombed the city with fire, and took away ponies as if they were stocking up for winter. Some said it was revenge because some pony killed a griffin. Others figured they wanted the city gone so they could use it for themselves. But what does a griffin want with the land when they own the skies?" He looked down at the stuffed rabbit that he held in his hooves for a moment. "After that, every pony became a soldier. I became a soldier."

"You were six!" said Heart Chase. "How could they turn a child into a soldier?"

"I don't really know. Training, I think" said Ridgeline. "I have a hard time remembering a lot of things from those years. It's all kind of fuzzy, and it makes my head hurt to remember it. I'm not the only one though. There were a bunch of us that age that all started training at the same time, but I

don't know what happened to the others. I think they all died in the war." He held out the stuffed rabbit to Heart Chase. "Can I keep this? It reminds me of a toy my sister had."

"Why are you asking me?" said Heart Chase.

Ridgeline put it aside with a guilty look and walked away. Heart Chase picked up the toy. She put it in her satchel, and followed as he walked away.

Along the southern portion of the ruins, a new city began to thrive. Smaller, certainly, and built as a fortress rather than a true city, but it was there, and it housed ponies. Ballistae had been mounted along the city walls that aimed for the sky. Ponies walked the streets in thick winter coats as they watched the tundra. Smiles were nowhere to be found as the herd approached the city of New Hoofswell, and a pony wearing a woolen hat stopped the herd as they arrived at the gates.

"What's your business?" he asked, looking over the ponies.

"We're lookin' fer a pony named Star Heart," said Heart Chase. "You know if he's still around?" The pony at the gate just shrugged.

"Never heard of him," he said.

The ponies waited expectantly for an offer of help or suggestion as to where to go next, but they were instead met with an indifferent stare. The ponies simply walked off, leaving the wool capped pony by the city entrance to do... whatever it was he did. Instead of being greeted by other friendly faces, they were greeted by the slush covered streets of New Hoofswell. Constance fluttered above the mess with some disdain.

"Doesn't any pony here control the weather?" asked the pegasus. "I mean, really. Bridleburg is populated almost entirely by earth ponies, and you don't see this kind of lousy winter weather. It's September for Celestia's sake, and there's a foot of snow on the ground."

"Probably the griffons," said Ridgeline, looking up to the clouds. "It snows until April around here. Some pony once told me that the griffins are trying to freeze out the remaining ponies here." He looked out to the miserable,

bundled masses of New Hoofswell. “But we’re tougher stuff than that, I guess. Or maybe we’re just stubborn.”

With no real direction, the ponies wandered the streets for a while and made occasional inquiries with whatever ponies seemed friendly enough to talk to. There weren’t many and after a few hours of wandering, they had returned to the entrance of the New Hoofswell. A few of the guard ponies wandering the town had hassled them, but upon seeing Ridgeline in his Knight’s armor, and hearing his Hoofswell accent, they left the herd alone.

By the time they had made the circuit around the city, the sun had begun to set. Heart Chase could have sworn it was only mid-afternoon. Bard pointed out how far north they were, and tried to explain a bit about axial tilt. Most of it went over Heart Chase’s head, but she understood from the explanation that days this far north were really short in the fall and winter.

Lacking a plan, the ponies decided to find a room at an inn for the evening and start fresh tomorrow. Part of the problem they were facing was they didn’t know when the army of Bridleburg was going to reach Canterlot. They assumed they had less than a week till Glaive marched on the capital, but they had no idea where he was, or what he was planning. Educated guesses were all they had, and Heart Chase prayed that her sister would be clever enough to realize that the Iron Pick she was traveling with wasn’t who he claimed to be.

...

Glaive stood above the body of one of Celestia’s Knights. The white earth pony put up his hooves to beg for mercy, but his pleas were met with the fetlock blade that pierced his chest. His dying breath was that of a simple question. Why?

Glaive looked upon the battlefield with a sense of pride. Dozens of bodies from either side lay upon the field of battle, and the sounds of a full retreat were music to the ears of their future ruler. He was close now to the conditions set forth by the princess those five years ago, though not in the spirit she had intended. He turned to find Apple Chase beside him, decked out in her own armor.

“I can see why you reveal in this,” she said. “It’s so... exhilarating. Where

would you have ever learned a skill like this?”

“Have you ever met a griffon?” asked Glaive. “Fascinating creatures, really. My parents were diplomats of sorts, and they frequently would bring other dignitaries home to meet the family. When I was about ten, I met the griffon ambassador from their territories. He had come to try to understand pony magic. My useless brother and I taught his family simple magic tricks, and in return he taught me how to fight with the heart of the griffons.”

“You have a brother?” asked Apple Chase. Glaive huffed with disapproval.

“He’s spineless, and twice over a traitor,” said Glaive. “He rebelled against Celestia, then against the Lunar Republic. I swear, when I see him again, I will cut off his horn and wear it as a trophy.” He spat upon the ground. “Death’s too good for him.” Apple Chase thought for a moment before speaking again.

“Didn’t the griffons burn Hoofswell to the ground?” she asked.

“That was hysterical,” giggled Glaive. “I laughed for an hour when I first heard about that. Apparently, those rock bucking bumpkins tried to negotiate sky rights or something equally stupid with the griffons. Griffons do as they please, and trying to make a contract with them is like trying to raise the dead.” He pushed aside the body of the pony he had just killed. “Impossible, unless you’re willing to delve into madness.”

They walked back from the field of battle to where the generals had gathered again. Daisy Lane had returned to the ranks of the Knights during the fight to put in a good appearance. They would welcome her back from her imprisonment and congratulate her on her daring escape. With so many officers slain, the Knights would give her command of a legion. Then, when the time was right, she’d surrender, and open the gates of Canterlot for the invading forces. Her only worry was getting back through the Everfree Forest.

The forest itself was a dangerous place. From the ruins of the old castle, it had grown in leaps and bounds over the past five years. As if fueled by a desire to overtake civilization, the trees grew like weeds, and the weeds practically shot from the ground. No matter how much any pony slashed and burned, it grew back stronger and hardier than ever. It seemed to

reflect the heart of Equestria: afraid for its own future.

Still, the future of Equestria lie in the hooves of those who were willing to fight for it, and every pony that had followed the message of Glaive was willing to put their troops into the fight. With Canterlot's forces battered and on the run, the march through the forest would be a swift. At the end of the march lay one last fight, and from there, the kingdom of Equestria. Glaive smiled at his princess.

"Tell me, Apple Chase," said Glaive. "Where do you think we should make our court?"

...

The inn the ponies had found looked remarkably like the one in Bridleburg, albeit with no windows, and tapestries lining the walls in a vain attempt to insulate the room. The building was a single story of stone that was divided into a commons area and a series of private rooms along a rear hallway. Heart Chase paid for a room for the ponies, and ordered dinner. They had made a lot less progress then they had hoped, and they sat in quiet commiseration.

For an hour they listened instead of talking. The chill air sapped their spirits, and drained the conversation from their lips. Heart Chase could easily see why the ponies this far north were so miserable; it was hard to make friends when you were shivering all the time. Even after listening to conversations, they still had no idea where to begin looking. Heart Chase finally snapped after an hour.

"How the heck are we supposed to find an old pony in a town of old ponies?" she asked. "We got a description, and a city. Ain't much to go off of there."

"Excuse me," asked a pink filly. "But who are you looking for?"

The table turned to look at the filly. Her hair was the color of strawberries, and her coat was shaggy from head to toe. She smiled with the eagerness of a child that hadn't learned that everypony wasn't a friend yet. Wrapped around midsection was a thin cloak of wool that couldn't possibly be keeping her warm. Heart Chase couldn't help but want to hug the fuzzy

little pony.

"Muffins!" shouted a grey stallion. "Leave those strangers alone." The pink filly cringed at her father's admonishment. "I'm sorry, she won't bother you again." Heart Chase noticed the pick cutie mark on the father.

"Hey, ya'll wouldn't happen to be Picks, would yah?" she asked.

"Ah, hell, not this again," sighed the Stallion. "My family came here years ago to work the rock farms. We're just as native as anypony else and if you think I'm going to put up with any sort of..."

"No, no," said Heart Chase. "It ain't like that. I'm a Pick too; by marriage at least." The stallion gave her a quizzical look. He looked to Ridgeline, then to the other ponies in the party.

"So?" asked the grey stallion.

"I'm sayin' we're kin, and kin ain't strangers." She extended a hoof. "The name's Heart Chase. It's a pleasure to meet you." The stallion shook her hoof with hesitation.

"Limestone Quarry," introduced the Stallion. "This is my daughter, Muffins."

"So you're a rock farmer?" asked Ridgeline. "Good profession. My family did that until... well, all that happened." He looked down at Muffins with a sad glance.

"Mine too," said Limestone. "I still work the quarries when the weather lets up. If it weren't for all these damn griffons, Hoofswell might actually be a decent place to live."

"What's the problem with griffons?" asked Constance. Limestone blinked in amazement at the pegasus. He looked as if he'd seen an angel.

"Oh my goddess, you have wings," he said. He pointed the wings out to his daughter. "Look at the pegasus! I bet she can fly, honey. Isn't that amazing?" His expression changed from dour to inexplicably happy. "We haven't seen a pegasus around these parts for years. The griffons keep killing them all." Constance jaw dropped in shock. How was that a happy

thing? "They figure if they can freeze us out, they can move into to claim the area and all the gem mines."

"What do griffons want with gems?" asked Heart Chase.

"Same as any pony," said Ridgeline. "Only problem is, they can't dig like ponies, so they have to find others to do it for them." Ridgeline shrugged. "I don't know who would dig for those basta..." Ridgeline remembered the filly, and checked his speech mid sentence. "Anyway, they were always trying to muscle in on our land, and we just kept pushing them back."

"Didn't you ever try to negotiate with them?" asked Heart Chase. The entire inn fell silent at her remark. Heart Chase turned to the room with a half frown. "Mind yer own business." She turned back to Ridgeline and Limestone. "So, have yah?"

"Griffins have a nasty habit of eating ponies that get too close," said Limestone. "That's why there aren't any pegasi in Hoofswell. Well, there is one." He looked down at his daughter. She smiled back at the ponies.

"You're keeping her wings bound?" gasped Constance. "Don't you know how much that hurts?"

"I got used to it," said Muffins. The fuzzy little pegasus's voice was tinged with resignation. "It only hurts a little bit now and then. Daddy says it keeps me safe." Limestone sighed with defeat.

"I don't want to, believe me," protested Limestone. "I want my little Muffins to be able to soar like her mommy used to. But with the griffons always go after pegasi first." He sighed and slumped to the table in defeat. "There's nothing we can do about it." He looked up from the table at the ponies. "You said you were looking for somepony?" Heart Chase nodded.

"His name is Star Heart," she said. "Supposedly he's an old lavender unicorn with a heart and star cutie mark. He came home this way after the war, but that's the last anypony's ever heard of him." The inn had again fallen silent as she listen to Heart Chase's western accent. She looked back at the crowd for a moment. "Well if ya'll are listenin' anyway, anyone of yah ponies seen Star Heart?" Murmurs filled the room, but no answers came from the crowd. "Ain't anypony got an answer fer me? If he's dead, I'd like

to know, so I can just go home.” She stared at the crowd a moment. “Anypony? No?” Silence. “Buncha mules,” she muttered.

“Star Heart is that nice old pony who lives near the griffons!” said Muffins.

“Muffins!” scolded Limestone. “Sorry, she’s prone to flights of fancy,” he nervously giggled. “Part of being a pegasus, I think. All heads in the clouds even when they’re stuck on land.”

“What was that, Muffins?” asked Heart Chase. Limestone spoke up to protest, but was frightened into silence by a single glare from the yellow Mare.

“Mister Star Heart lives up in the mountains,” said Muffins. “You have to sneak through the old city. That’s easy. The griffons don’t come out until it’s dark, and with all the old buildings over there, they can’t see you.” Muffins beamed with pride as she explained how she snuck around the ruins of Hoofswell. “I go up to his house all the time. He tells me all kinds of stories, and he has the best candies. I don’t know how he gets back into his house, cause I have to fly up the...” She stopped and bit her tongue. “Uh oh.”

“You’ve been flying?” demanded Limestone. “Muffins, what have I told you about that? Griffons will eat you if you fly!”

“Now Limestone,” admonished Constance. “If you don’t allow a child to spread her wings and fly, you wind up creating another miserable pony. And from what I can see, this town has enough miserable ponies.” Limestone again started to protest. “No buts!” scolded Constance. “It’s bad enough you’re binding your filly’s wings, but to deny her the flight? Inexcusable!” She turned her hateful glare to a pleasant smile, and looked back to Muffins. “Miss Muffins, would you be kind enough to show us where Mister Star Heart lives?” The fuzzy little pegasus grinned with a smile that lit up dreary the room.

“I get to help a big pegasus with something?” she squealed. Muffins started bouncing around Constance and cheering. “Best day ever!”

“Why do you even need to see that crackpot?” asked Limestone. “He only comes to town once a year, and hasn’t spoken to anypony in the entire time he’s lived here. What makes you think he’ll talk to you?”

“Because we’re here to save Equestria from itself,” said Heart Chase. “He’s gonna want to hear what we have to say.”

Chapter 10

Disappointment Carries All My Dreams

Once again, the ponies found themselves huddled together for warmth during the night. Bard and Ridgeline again shared a bed, though Bard had managed to spell himself asleep before the massive stallion began snoring. Constance and Heart Chase shared the next room over in a pile of downy blankets, though Constance was inexplicably nervous about something. Rather than her normal routine of falling asleep immediately, she kept getting up and walking around the tiny, windowless room.

“What’s troublin’ yah?” ask Heart Chase. With a rather embarrassed look, Constance finally sat down next Heart Chase.

“Promise you won’t tell anyone?” asked Constance. She sounded meek and pitiable, rather than her normal sultry and confident. Heart Chase of course nodded. “I’m quite a bit claustrophobic,” she said. “Normally, there’s a window so I can at least see outside, but this just too close for me.” She started looking around in a panic. “I just feel like I need some room to breathe.” She got up again, and paced the room. She spread her wings and touched both walls with the tips. “It’s just too small. Too small in here.”

“Hey, settle down now,” said Heart Chase. “No need to get all concerned; ain’t nothin’ bad gonna happen to yah as long as I’m around. Yah think I’m gonna let my favorite blanket get all nervous and upset?” Constance composed herself again and sat back down next to Heart Chase.

“Yes, of course, you’re right,” said Constance. “Even when I’m in a room like this I’m usually working, so there’s that to distract me.” She chuckled nervously. “Funny thing that. I try not to talk about my work, and here I am gabbing to you about my job like you’re the sister I never had.”

Heart Chase winced at the word sister. Here she thought she’d found another mare with similar tastes, but apparently that ship had sailed. Still, there was always a chance, and if nothing else, she could always just enjoy Constance’s company as a feathery blanket.

“So, uh, how’d yah even get into that sort of thing?” asked Heart Chase.

“Oh, the same way any gal does, I suppose,” said Constance with a flip of her auburn mane. “Somepony offered me some money for my time, and I found it to be exhilarating, really. I get to choose my clients and I’ve obviously got the body to be picky.” She stood up and struck a pose for Heart Chase. The earth pony looked away far too quickly from the pegasus feathered wings and silky tale to be simply polite. It wasn’t until Constance saw the blush of Heart Chase’s yellow cheeks did she put two and two together.

“Oh dear,” she said with an embarrassed gasp. “I didn’t... I thought you were just... oh my, I’m so sorry. Here I’ve been prancing and strutting my stuff to annoy Bard, and embarrass Ridgeline, and then I’ve been spending the night all over you like a cheap saddle.” She sat back down next to Heart Chase. “The last few nights must have been an absolute hell for you.”

“If yah think hell is full of licorice scents and downy feathers, then you’d be right,” said Heart Chase. “I didn’t mind one bit. I mean, I don’t mind havin’ another pony to sleep with whether they’re mare or a stallion. Used to be my family would all sleep in a big pile on winter’s nights to keep warm. Now we’re all grown up, and every other pony is married, and has kids. There’s just me in my lonely bed.” She laughed with kind of a half defeated chuckle. “It’s funny. I got married for political reasons. Iron Pick’s a swell stallion, but what I was lookin’ forward to most was sharin’ a bed with another pony, even if it meant... well, you know.” Constance smiled at her traveling companion, and sat down next to her.

“Did you not want to share a bed this evening?” she asked. “I completely understand if you’re hesitant about it. I’ll send Bard in here, and share a bed with Ridgeline instead. That big stallion could probably heat an entire room.”

“If you think for a moment I’m gonna share a bed with the mouthy pain in the flank, then you gotta another thing comin’ Constance,” said Heart Chase. “Yah just come lay down here. I promise to keep my hooves to myself.” She gave a half hearted smile. “If yah want me too, that is.” Constance returned the smile with a coy giggle.

The ponies rose the next morning at what would be their normal time to discover that it was still completely dark outside. The ponies made their way to the home of Limestone Quarry and Muffins where they found the fuzzy pegasus positively vibrating with elation about going on an adventure with her new friends.

The walk through the ruins of Hoofswell in the pre dawn hours was an unsettling experience for most of the ponies. Bard's light shone through the darkness like a ray of sunshine, but the narrow beam wasn't good for much more than a spot light. He eventually stopped to let his eyes acclimate to the dark instead; it didn't help much.

Muffins fluttered along with Constance just above the ground while Ridgeline marched alongside the pegasus filly as if to keep the darkness away. Heart Chase followed behind the herd, keeping her eyes and ears peeled for any sign of trouble. She kept glancing at the cloudy sky, and jumping at the shadows.

What scared her most about this place was that it could have just as easily been Bridleburg. The few pegasi, combined with the relative proximity to hostile creatures set her teeth on edge. They did have the advantage of the Dame River separating them from the Buffalo lands, but what is a river to a determined foe? Luckily, the buffalo never seemed to care about ponies, so long as they stayed on the Equestria side of the river. Still, it amazed her at just how hostile the outside world actually was sometimes. She couldn't help but worry about two pegasi that traveled with her.

They passed through the ruined city in silence and began climbing the icy foothills that lead into the mountains. How the fuzzy young pegasus had routinely made this journey was any pony's guess. How she had avoided notice by the griffons was nothing short of a miracle. They came at last to a sheer granite cliff face that marked the borders of Equestria. It was easy to imagine that the world ended here, and that beyond was only the howling chaos of space. The pegasus urged them onward along the sheer rock face, and they turned to the east. It was another three miles before they came to a patch of unusually low hanging clouds.

"He lives right up there!" said Muffins. "You just fly up, and..." she looked at the ponies for a moment. "Oh. Well, I guess not."

The ponies stared up at the rock face. A least a hundred feet above the ground, there was massive fissure that looked as if it had been hollowed out of the solid stone and below that was an overhang that could have easily been a balcony. Heart Chase stared in amazement for a moment before shaking her head.

“How in the name of Celestia does an old unicorn get all the way up there?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” said Muffins. “I never asked. But he’s always up there, so at least Miss Constance and I can go see him.”

Heart Chase looked up the cliff, and shivered. The idea of having to be that high off the ground chilled her more than the arctic air that whipped along the cliff face. She was actually glad she didn’t have to go up there after all.

The two pegasi took to the air and danced around the low hanging clouds as if choreographing a ballet. They landed atop them and danced upon them as if they were solid ground. Such was the pleasure of all the pegasi, and it was so rare that young muffin actually had time to frolic. Heart Chase looked up at the playing pegasi and smiled. Of course she would want to show the fuzzy filly a good time; Constance was all about enjoying herself. Never mind that they were on a deadline, or that there might be griffons around. There was fun to be had, and darn it, everything had been way too serious in the city.

The two pegasi finally landed atop the jutting rock near the top of the cliff face. As they touched down, Constance noticed that it was at least twenty degrees warmer here than at the ground. She looked around a for moment before she noticed daylight spilling from underneath the door. She tapped on the door with a cautious knock.

The door burst open, and from behind it came a near blinding light that silhouetted the shape of a unicorn. Constance shielded her eyes with a wing as they adjusted to the brilliance. A purple unicorn wearing a set of smoked goggles looked his unexpected guests. He stared at Constance for a moment. She’d seen that looked before, and she cocked her hips to accentuate his view of her cutie mark. He turned to the fuzzy filly after a moment.

“Who’s your friend?” asked the unicorn.

“Mister Star Heart, this is Miss Constance,” said Muffins. “She’s here with a bunch of her friends. They’re all the way down there at the bottom ‘cause they can’t get up here like we can.” She flashed her heartwarming smile, and the unicorn found a smile within him for the filly.

“Well thanks for coming to visit,” said Star Heart. “But I’m afraid I can’t tell you any stories today. I’m in the middle of an important experiment.”

“Mister Star heart, please,” said Constance. He held up a hoof.

“I know what you’re here for,” he said. “You want to know the last thing Celestia said to me before she went into exile.” He slammed a hoof into the stone floor so hard it sounded like thunder. “THAT WILL DIE WITH ME. If you really want to know, there’s a pony named Glaive out there who will happily tell you. Or maybe he’ll tear out your heart. Either way, a young mare such as yourself shouldn’t be seeking the great mysteries of life from old unicorns. You shouldn’t even be in Hoofswell. Now, if you’ll excuse me I...”

“Hey!” yelled Heart Chase. Her voice echoed along the sheer stone. “How’s it going up there? What’s with all the light? Y’all okay?”

“We’re fine, Heart Chase,” she yelled back. “Mister Star Heart seems a bit upset that we’ve interrupted his experiments.” The unicorn perked up at the name.

“Sorry, did you say, Heart Chase?” he asked. “As in, the daughter of Soul Chase?”

“I don’t know,” said Constance. “I guess I never asked.”

“You’re supposedly a friend, and you never asked about her parents?” asked Star Heart. “That’s what’s wrong with Equestria these days, no pony makes friends.” Muffins pouted at the unicorn. He furiously backpedaled on his statement. “Except for Miss Muffins here. She’s a friend to every pony she meets.” He pointed a hoof at Constance. “And that’s how Equestria used to be. Strangers were just friends you hadn’t met yet.” Star Heart walked to the edge of the cliff face, and then continued walking off it.

Constance was so shocked that she didn't react for almost a full second. When her brain finally put together what had just happened, she rocketed over the edge of the cliff to try to catch up with the unicorn. Constance passed him at full speed; he was standing on a sinking cloud. The rose colored pegasus screeched to a hover to stare in disbelief. Muffins peered over the edge with an impressed grin.

The cloud sank to the ground, and Star Heart stepped off. It seemed as if the warmth followed him. He looked over Heart Chase for a moment, and nodded. She was the spitting image of her father. Same orange hair, same yellow coat, same blue eyes, and the same bewildered stare. She was definitely a Chase. He turned his gaze to the armored stallion. He hasn't seen a pony that big since leaving Knights. He finally looked at the sky blue unicorn. He stared for a moment, before shaking his head.

"If I didn't know better," said Star Heart. "I'd have sworn you were..."

"I get that a lot," replied Bard. "That's an impressive spell you've got there," he said as he tried to shift the conversation away from himself.

"Cloud walking?" he scoffed. "Foal's play. Any pegasus can do it, why shouldn't a unicorn be able to do the same?" He looked to Heart Chase. "Your father always talked about you," he said. "Always went on and on about his clever little filly. Now you're all grown up and out in the big scary world." He looked to the four ponies that stood before him. "Why are you out here, and not at home?"

"I made a mistake," said Heart Chase. "And Iron Pick is told me yah were about the only pony who could help fix it." Star Heart Pushed his goggles away to reveal a pair of turquoise eyes that sparkled as if the sun shined from his head.

"Well then, if that old goat told you to come bother me, he must have had a good reason," said Star Heart. With a wave of his horn, the pony's hooves sparkled. He walked to the cloud and stomped it flat enough for the rest of the ponies to stand on. He motioned to them to join. The ponies stepped on the cloud with trepidation; it certainly seemed solid enough. Heart Chase stood in the exact center of the platform and clamped her eyes shut. The other ponies boarded the platform and surrounded the mare.

The cloud began to rise back along the cliff face. Heart Chase stood still, taking deep breathes, and focusing on anything else but the fact she was rising into the air. Birds. Trees. How cold it was. Her family. She hummed along to a children's song as the cloud lifted into the sky. She didn't dare open her eyes, less she see how far off the ground they were. Ridgeline guided her onto the outcropping balcony, and inside the cliff face before she opened her eyes again.

The inside of Star Heart's Home was not cave, per say, but more of an apartment that had been carved from solid rock. The walls had perfectly flattened, and there were at least a dozen separate doors that spilled into other rooms. Most were closed, but a few housed rooms full of clouds. At the rear of the apartment sat a ball of light that gave off enough heat to make the apartment feel like the tropics. The ponies shed their winter coats at the door, and were glad to feel warmth after a bitter cold night in Hoofswell.

Star Heart opened another door that inexplicably lead outside. From it, he pulled a jar that had been chilling in the bank of snow. He passed around drinks to the ponies gathered in front him before sitting on a pillow made from clouds.

"So why are you here?" asked Star Heart.

"Iron Pick said yah were the only pony who knew what Celestia's last instructions were," said Heart Chase.

She fished through her satchel to retrieve the letter of introduction that he had given her, and passed it to Star Heart. He quickly looked it over, and tossed it to the side.

"So I'm just supposed give you instructions for saving the world, eh?" asked Star Heart. "You'd be surprised at how simple a thing it is to bring her back, and yet you bunch of ponies aren't going to be the ones to do it."

"We didn't' come all the way from Bridleburg to be told that we ain't gonna be able to do somethin'," said Heart Chase. "We gotta war to stop, and the only other pony who knows how to stop it is the one who's causin' it. Now what did Celestia say before she went into exile?" Star Heart cocked a half

smile

"You're not going to like it," said Star Heart. "The last thing that Celestia said was 'I just want the fighting to stop.'"

The ponies sat for there for a minute, expecting to take in a deep and pondering message that would guide them along the path of Equestria's salvation. That had expected something profound and heartfelt, something that would shake them to their core. What they got instead was something they already knew.

"Are you bucking kidding me?" asked Bard.

"Sorry," said Star Heart. "That's what she said."

"That's about the least helpful thing I've ever heard," said Heart Chase. "How are those instructions for bringing Celestia out of exile? That ain't nothin' we didn't already know. Everypony wants the fightin' to stop, but that ain't told us how to do it."

"Do you know what the Elements of Harmony are?" asked Star Heart. The ponies looked at each other for a moment, before shaking their heads. "They were what Celestia used to seal Nightmare Moon away. I don't know where Celestia got them, or what their original purpose was, but the long and the short of its, she used them, then lost control of them. They were supposedly what kept Equestria harmonious, but Celestia used them as a weapon against Nightmare Moon." He held out his hooves. "Now they're pretty much inert."

"So, what, we gotta find these Elements of Harmony?" asked Heart Chase. Star Heart shook his head.

"No, they're powerless now and they won't be able to help you any way. You're not connected to them, the sisters were. I don't think any pony is ever going to be able to use them again." he said. "If you'd care to hear my theory?"

"Why not?" said Bard. "Not like we have anything else to go on."

"I think once ponies stop fighting," said Star Heart, "Celestia will reveal

herself again and retake her throne.”

The ponies looked at each other, then back to Star Heart. Was this unicorn out of his mind? There was only one war going on right now, two if you counted the griffins attacking Hoofswell. How could any group of ponies stop two wars, let alone one? Star Heart got up from his cloud and began tweaking the sun orb at the back of his apartment.

“That’s all the advice I have to give you,” said Star Heart. “Stay as long as you’d like, but when you do leave, please take Miss Muffins back to her father. I don’t want anything happening to my little friend.”

“So that’s it?” asked Heart Chase. “Yah ain’t gonna help us? No big poof of magic, and a sword to strike down the evil? Just stop the fightin’?”

“I don’t know what you came here expecting,” said Star Heart. “I’m a weather pony; it’s what I do. I take the essence of the wind and sky, and bring it down for earth ponies to use.” Bard perked up at the mention of that. He probably knew what Heart’s stone was all about then. He levitated the stone from Heart’s satchel.

“Then what is this?” asked Bard.

“Hey, what did I tell you about goin’ through my things?” demanded Heart Chase. Star Heart looked at the stone for a moment, and then nodded.

“It’s a fog stone,” said Star Heart. He levitated the stone, and pressed it to his ear. “And it’s empty. You can recharge it by siphoning clouds.” He tossed it into the room full of clouds, and shut the door.

Bard blinked in amazement. That explained all the fog back in the bay. Star Heart floated the stone back to Heart Chase’s bag, and then turned back to his work.

“I want you to think carefully, Miss Chase,” said Star Heart.

“Missus,” corrected Heart Chase. “I got married a few days ago.”

“Oh well, congratulations,” said Star Heart. “Why aren’t you enjoying your honeymoon with your new groom? The world could use more Chases.”

“Cause Iron Pick already has two kids, and it was our marriage that started this nonsense in the first place.” Star Chase stopped what he was doing, and turned around to face Heart Chase. She could see the wheels in his head turning as he put the pieces together, and when it finally clicked, his jaw dropped in disgust.

“No wonder,” he said. “Chases and Picks together at last. Making a bid for an independent Bridleburg are you?” The other ponies turned to stare at her in shock.

“Independent Bridleburg?” asked Ridgeline. “That’s...” he searched for the word.

“Treason!” said Constance. “That’s out and out treason! Here I thought you wanted to save Equestria, but you’re out here to break it up. How long do you think you could hide such a thing? And Bard, how could you have not put that together sooner?”

“I did,” said Bard. “But you know what? I don’t care.”

“What do you mean, you don’t care?” asked Ridgeline. “How can you not care about Equestria?”

“Equestria is dead!” said Bard. “Celestia’s gone, and she’s not coming back. Even if by some miracle, we did stop the fighting, how long would it last? A week? A month? Would she notice? Would she care? The only thing that Celestia does that matters is raise the sun and the moon. Past that, no pony cares about her anymore.”

“I still care,” said Muffins. The ponies looked at the fuzzy pegasus as if she had just appeared. They had been so busy fighting with each other, they had forgotten that there was a child in their midst. “I still care about Celestia. Back when my mom was still alive, she cleared away the clouds so that we could see the sun all the time. Mom told me that Princess Celestia raised the sun every morning, and that we should give her thanks every day for the hard work she does.” She looked up at the ponies. “So some ponies do care about Celestia, you mean old unicorn. Even if you don’t like her, there’s lots of ponies who do.” She stuck her tongue out at Bard.

The wisdom of a child struck at them like a hoof to the temple. Ponies still cared. They proved they cared by working together to make Equestria the place it was now. Certainly, it was a shell of its former self, but the basic tenants of harmony were still there under the ash and debris of endless war. Ponies really did need each other more than they were willing to admit, and they needed Celestia to be an example to them all.

“So how do we stop the fighting?” asked Heart Chase.

“As I was trying to say, I want all of you to think carefully,” said Star Heart. “There’s something that will help you understand why it’s important that Equestria stay together. Think of every pony you know who was a soldier during that horrible war. What was the common thing about them all?”

The ponies thought for a moment, and considered the question. Of all the soldiers they had known, both from their own time in the military, and from having met other ponies who had fought, there wasn’t anything at all in common between them. There had been nobility on both sides of the war, and common pony folk in the trenches. Pegasi, unicorn, mules, donkeys, and earth ponies had all fought on either side of the conflict. They even differed on their beliefs for Equestria. Nothing was common between them. It finally dawned on Heart Chase when she looked back at Ridgeline.

“No pony was a soldier by trade,” she said at last. “Every pony was farmer, or a business pony, or a preacher, or anything else. Ain’t no pony ever just been for fightin’, except maybe for Ridgeline.” Star Heart nodded.

“And there you have it,” said Star Heart. “No pony has ever been born to kill, not even your armored friend here. There are plenty who can fight, and plenty who are exceptional. But you’ll never see a cutie mark of a sword. Ponies are supposed to be at peace. That’s what Celestia wants to see before she makes her return.”

The ponies all considered what she meant. If they were going to bring back Celestia, they needed the fighting to stop. They needed to end the war between the griffons, and they needed to end the war between Bridleburg and Equestria. The unspoken question between them was how in Equestria did they accomplish that?

The ponies sat talking for a few hours as they mulled over ideas for peace. No pony had spoken to a griffon in a least ten years, so they didn't even know where to start negotiations. And to stop the war for Equestria, well, they'd have to take out Glaive. Neither prospect seemed possible at the moment, and they found themselves talking in circles. Frustrated, and finally tired of the sauna like conditions of Star Heart's apartment, the ponies bundled themselves in their winter coats, and stepped out onto the ledge. Waiting for the ponies on the ridge was a griffon who sat there with his arms crossed.

"It's about time," he said. "Hand over the pegasi, or you all die."

Chapter 11

Truth and Fear

What happened next was a bit of unbridled chaos.

Ridgeline leaped over the ponies and tackled the griffon off the side of the cliff. Without any regard for his own safety, he choked the griffon as they plummeted for the ground. Bard went to cast a spell but caught a paw to the teeth instead as two other griffons swooped in from the ridge. Knocked backward into the cliff side by the force of the blow, the unicorn went down in a heap of hooves and horn. The other griffon grabbed the pegasus filly from the ledge. Heart Chase bucked and smashed the griffon into the wall. The winged lion didn't even see the hooves coming and dropped the fuzzy filly. Heart Chase caught Muffins in her hooves, and tossed her to Constance.

Constance grabbed up Muffins and sped toward the door. Before she could get back inside, a griffon larger than Ridgeline thundered up from below the outcropping, and grabbed both her wings. The griffon's massive wings buffeted Heart Chase and nearly blew her off the cliff side. She skid across the smooth stone, and lost her footing. Barely able to grab the edge, Heart Chase could only watch helplessly as the griffons made off with the two pegasi. It wasn't until she looked down that she really began to panic.

It may have only been a hundred feet, but it seemed like a mile drop through low hanging clouds. She forgot about her quest, about the ponies she was traveling with, about Muffins. All she knew in that moment was that she was going to die. She scrabbled along the edge of the outcropping, pawing for purchase along the smooth rock. Below her was nothing but open sky, and fear had taken over her every thought.

Star Heart galloped out of his apartment to witness the aftermath of the attack. He had seen Bard go down, and Ridgeline jump off the cliff. Heart Chase shrieked for help, barely hanging on. Star Hear levitated the mare off the edge, and put her back on the ledge. She bolted for the apartment. In a single moment, she was curled up in a ball in the corner with tears of

terror streamed down her face.

In less than a minute, her party had been decimated. Bard lay in a quiet heap against the cliff face, Constance had been carried off holding Muffin in her hooves, and Ridgeline had plummeted off the edge while strangling a griffon. What the hell had just happened?

“What happened?” asked Star Chase, as he dragged Bard inside. “Where is everypony?”

“G-g-g-griffons,” she stammered. “Just at-t-t-tacked out of n-n-nowhere. Swooped in. T-t-t-took M-m-muffins.”

“They took Muffins?” asked Star Chase. “Damn it all! I should have known they’d have seen all five of you.” He started throwing aside boxes of gems and trinkets, searching through his apartment for something. “It’s my fault, I should have protected her. She was the only friend I had here; you have to get her back.”

Heart Chase was rocking in the corner. Her bravery had failed her as she dangled on the edge of the cliff. She was uneasy with the height when she had her eyes closed, but to get dangled from the edge of a cliff was just too much. She had no idea how she was going to get out of here now. She couldn’t go back on that cliff face. Nothing in Equestria could get her back out there; not even the chance to save that poor filly. Star Heart put his face against hers.

“I’m talking to you, Heart Chase,” he said. “You have to get Muffins back. You have to go after the griffons before they kill them both!”

“N-n-no. No. No.” Heart Chase shook her head in protest. She was never leaving that corner. It’d take a team of wild Hamites to drag her away, and even then she’d fight them tooth and hoof. The screeching of a griffon outside the front door sent her into back into tears of hysterics. Star Heart ran for the door to see what was going on.

The griffon that Ridgeline had tackled rose over the edge of the balcony as he struggled against the pony’s impossible strength. Ridgeline had wrapped an elbow around the griffon’s neck; the griffon fell to the platform as he choked for air. Talons clattered across the surface of Ridgeline’s

armor like hail on a tin roof in a vain attempt to struggle free. His eyes rolled back into his head, and the griffon slumped in the pony's arms. Ridgeline dropped the lion bird to smooth stone, and then looked inside the apartment.

Bard was lying in a heap just outside the door, while Heart Chase was crying in the corner. Star Heart stood at his door, dumbfounded by what he had just seen. The only ponies missing were Muffins and Lady Constance.

"Is every pony okay?" he asked.

"How did you do that?" asked Star Heart.

"What?" asked Ridgeline. "Oh, the griffon? If you choke anything long enough, they stop moving."

"I meant how did you not die when you plummeted off the cliff?" asked Star Heart. Ridgeline looked at the unicorn as if the answer should be obvious.

"I hit the clouds on the way down," he said. "The griffon tried to take off again, which is how I got back up here. Any pony would have done the same. Just like the heroes of the stories grandma used to read me. You fight evil; you win." He looked around for a moment. "Where's Muffins and Constance?"

"They got carried off," said Star Heart. "You have to go after them. I'm far too old to make the journey myself, but I can help you and your friends. Please; she's the only friend I have."

"They took Muffins?" demanded Ridgeline. He spit the mouth guard from his teeth. "They took my fair Lady Constance? How DARE they?" The copper coated stallion snorted as the flames of fury burned behind his eyes. "I watched my sister get murdered by those goddess damned griffons, and I will not let it happen again. No pegasus dies today. I swear by the light of Celestia that I will bring them back." Star Heart backed away from the enraged stallion.

"I'll give you some tools you'll need to get to the rookery, but you may need your friend's help," he said. He turned to look at Heart Chase; she was busy draining her flask. Bard was just standing up with an unsteady

wobble. He leaned against the wall for support.

“Grabbl, umma bleh...” he mumbled.

“Good, you’re awake,” said Ridgeline. “We’ve got no time to lose. Constance and Muffins got carried off, and it’s up to us to rescue them.”

“S’okay, mom, I’m not goin’ to school today,” muttered Bard. “I’m gonna be an aggable...” The unicorn propped his head against the wall and tried to focus his rolling yellow eyes. Ridgeline picked up a bucket of rain in his teeth, and splashed the unicorn in the face. What he responded with sounded like a combination of a strangled scream and a drowning gurgle. The unicorn shook out his mane and blinked a few times. “What happened?”

“You took a paw to the head,” said Star Chase. “I saw that much at least. Muffins and Constance have been abducted.” Bard snapped to his feet at that.

“Shit,” he said. “Do we know where they went?”

“No,” said Ridgeline, as he dragged in the griffon. “But I’m betting he does. Read his mind and find out where they took them.” Bard looked uneasily at his copper coated friend.

“I can’t,” said Bard. “I can’t read minds that don’t belong to ponies. All I get are pictures, fuzzy noises, and primal instincts.” He paused a moment. “Not entirely unlike what I get when I read your mind actually.”

“We don’t have time for your jokes,” said Ridgeline. “We need answers, and quick.”

“I’m not being funny,” said Bard. “I’m serious, and that kind of concerns me. But we don’t have time for that. Wake him up; I’ll get answers from him the old fashioned way.” Ridgeline doused the griffon with the remainder of the bucket.

With a bellowing screech; the griffon came too. He was inside a cramped cave, with a massive stallion standing on his wings, and two unicorns standing in front of him. He struggled under the weight of the copper coated

stallion for a minute before he realized just how trapped he was. He snapped at the hooves of the unicorn for a moment before giving up.

“Are you going to torture me?” asked the griffon.

“No, I’m not going to torture you,” said Bard. “I’m going to ask you a few questions, and you’re going to answer them.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I’ll take control of your body and have you kill yourself,” said Bard. The griffon’s face was lined with doubt. He knew that unicorns had magic, but that kind of magic? He shook his head.

“No one can do that,” spat the griffon.

“Oh really?” asked Bard. He looked at Star Chase a moment and his horn glowed with an eerie purple light. Star Heart felt himself losing control of his body as danced a jig about his apartment. He spun in lazy circles around the griffon as Bard made him dance. He stopped in front of the griffon and drew a hoof across his throat. “And Star Heart is my friend. Imagine what I could do to someone who was pissing me off.” Bard’s grin was that of a madman, and the peals of insidious laughter he followed with did more to frighten the griffon than any display of magic could have.

For the next ten minutes, the griffon related the location of the rookery, its defenses, and everything else the ponies needed to know about finding exactly where they took the two pegasi. When they were finally done with the question, they bound the griffon in chains, and locked him in an empty room. When they had returned, they’d let him go, but there was too much at stake to just let him run back to the rookery. Star Heart provided the ponies with boots that renewed his cloud walking spell, as well as the charged fog stone they could use as a bridge.

In the mean time, Heart Chase had gone near catatonic. Bard and Ridgeline only shook their heads in disappointment at the mare; apparently the near death experience had been too much for her. It was odd; she seemed like such a determined pony otherwise. Still, the two stallions had a job to do, and they weren’t going to let a frightened mare slow them down. Bard used the fog stone, and created a bridge to the top of the cliff

face.

Atop the cliff, a world of mountains spread before them like a surface of another world. From where they stood, the cliff top spread out like a desert until it became the foothills, and finally mountains that spiraled into the sky. Maybe twenty miles away in the distance, a spire jutted into the heavens like a spear. There was the Rookery in all of its malevolent glory, and that was where the ponies were headed next. The stallions turned to each other, and with a nod, they galloped off to save their friends.

...

With the events of the last few days, there had been no time to mourn the loss of a sibling. Now in the chill September evening, there was time to remember the fallen. There was time at last for tears for those lost.

Sound Cloud had arranged a memorial for those lost in the attacks. Instead of his usual bluster and bravado about the love of Celestia, and the importance of charity, he only read a list of names of those killed. Family, friends, dignitaries, foals; all those lives cut down by the work of a single mad-pony. Glaive had taken away their innocence, and replaced it with terror. Iron Pick didn't attend. To be presented with the face of that which they hated would be too much.

Quill Pick opened the door to his late brother's room with a sad sigh. It was a tragedy that such a promising life would be cut short by a cruel twist of fate. He didn't expect to find answers within his brother's effects, just comfort in the artifacts of a life gone by. There were hats adorning the walls, some with feathers as long as his mane. Quill had to smile; his brother did enjoy good headwear.

In his dressers, he found only the few clothes that Silk had taken a liking too. They would be given to those less fortunate, as was Silk's way of generosity. In a night stand, there was a tattered copy of the Book of Celestia: annotated, and dog eared at every turn. His brother really did have faith. Quill came at last to his brother's desk. It was locked. Quill blinked in amazement. Silk was always the most open of ponies; why would he have locked his desk?

After a minute of searching for the key hidden among the hats, Quill

opened the desk to discover a hooffull of scrolls that had been sealed at one time with a red wax. Some of the seals were that of the Chase family: rakes set across the background of the sun. But the one that set Quill on edge was the midnight purple wax that had been sealed with a crescent moon. It was the seal of the Lunar Rebellion. Quill picked up the scroll with dread, and read the contents.

I am glad you have chosen the path of the victorious, Silk Pick. Keep up your appearances, and keep to the plan. Do not forget that Barondom of Bridleburg lies at the end of the road ahead, and that only together can we succeed.

When the attack begins, corral Iron Pick toward the river. I need him alive to take his place. Make sure that my Apple Chase is unharmed. I will try to dispose of your brother, but you may have to do that on your own. I wish you well, Silk Pick, and I will see you after the wedding.

Burn this scroll after reading. Praise to Nightmare Moon.

Quill dropped the letter in horror. This couldn't possibly have been the brother he loved. Silk Pick would never have conspired with the embodiment of evil that was Glaive. The scroll knocked over a brass seal as it clattered to the desk. The seal rolled across the desk, and dropped to the floor. Quill looked at the design work, and the truth of it all became terrifyingly real. The stamp was that of a pick across the background of a crescent moon.

It suddenly made sense to him. The attack wasn't a raiding party, nor was the wedding something that Glaive had just heard about. Silk Pick had a hoof in the slaughter of his own family. It wasn't enough that he would benefit indirectly from an independent Bridleburg; he apparently wanted a bigger slice of the pie. So many dead, and for what? Quill read the letter again, searching for answers to his brother's treachery. He saw an important piece he missed on the first read through.

My Apple Chase.

"Oh my goddess."

Iron Pick sat in his office, spinning the globe on his desk. He hadn't slept at

all last night, and he was going on his fourth straight day of worry. Here he was, trapped in a body that wasn't his own, simply waiting for others. This wasn't the Iron Pick that had led the Pick family to greatness; this was the Iron Pick who had been defeated by a monster. The clatter of hoofs from the stone hall perked his ears. Quill came skidding into office, and threw a scroll onto his desk.

Iron Hoof levitated the scroll, and began to read over the letter. He stopped halfway through and started re reading it. He turned the scroll over, then checked the wax seal. He stared in disbelief at his son.

"Where did you find this?" asked Iron Pick.

"In Silk's desk," said Quill. "I don't want to believe this. I don't want think that my brother..." Iron Pick held up a hoof, stopping Quill mid sentence. He put the scroll down, and put his hooves on the desk.

"I knew there had to be a traitor in the family," said Iron Hoof. "I knew that this wasn't just some plan that Glaive had cooked up at the last minute. He had help." Iron Pick levitated the scroll, and looked at it again. Tears had formed at the corners of his eyes. "I thought I raised you boys with loyalty to family above all others. This just proves I'm a failure as a father." He held the end of the scroll to a candle, and dropped it in a stone bin. "Your brother is dead now; let us speak ill of him no more. What's done is done, and nothing can change that. What matters now is that we stop Glaive. Apple Chase has been in on it the whole time, and if she has designs to be queen, nothing will stop her." He looked at the globe to where Hoofswell lay. "My biggest fear is that Heart Chase won't be able to figure it out in time." He snapped his head away from the globe. "I'm going to Canterlot."

"What?" asked Quill. "You can't, there's two armies out there in your path. You'll never make it!"

"What good am I here?" demanded Iron Pick. "I can sit here and do nothing, or I can warn my wife of her sister's betrayal. What do you think I'm going to do, son?" Quill thought for a minute, and nodded.

"I will take care of the family in your absence," said Quill. "What else do you need from me?" Iron Pick thought for a moment.

“Fetch me my will, son.”

...

Heart Chase shivered awake. She looked around the apartment to see that Star Heart was still tinkering with his ball of light, and that all the other ponies had gone on without her. Had she fallen asleep? The apartment was warm and inviting, and she could easily have taken a nap there, but that didn't seem likely given how tired she felt. Where was everypony? Had they left her when they found out she was a traitor? She couldn't blame them. Heart Chase stood, and started toward the exit.

“Where do you think you're going?” asked Star Heart.

“Back to Hoofswell,” said Heart Chase. “I assume that's where every pony else went. Bard still needs to teleport us to Canterlot, even if he does hate me.”

“Bard and Ridgeline went after Constance,” said Star Heart. “They couldn't wait for you to get over being insane, so they left.’

“What do you mean?” asked Heart Chase. “Wasn't I just taking a nap?” Star Heart turned around, and looked at Heart Chase with a cocked eyebrow.

“You were catatonic for an hour,” said Star Heart. “That spill off the cliff turned you into a whimpering foal. I can't blame them for taking off without you; they didn't seem like they were your friends at all.” He leaned against a wall. “I always thought the Chases were so quick to make friends.”

“I just didn't know if I could trust them,” said Heart Chase. Star Heart only chuckled.

“Funny thing about trust, dearie,” said Star Heart. “They seemed to trust you enough to follow you into a warzone, and you couldn't trust them with the truth behind this whole mess?” He tsked at the mare. “It's a two way street, and you've completely failed to hold up your end of the deal. You might want to talk to Muffins, if she still alive. She knows all about friends.” Heart Chase shook her head. What had happened to Muffins? It all came back to her in a paralyzing flash. The cliff face, the griffons, Constance.

Muffins.

"If you want to go after them, then you'll need a few things," said Star Heart. "You four are friends who haven't met yet, I think. But the fires of trial forge friendships that not even nightmares can break. You have to face your fears, Heart Chase, and you have to help your friends." He dug another pair of boots from the boxes that littered his apartments, and then overturned a crate that contained his old Knight's armor. He looked at the plates for a moment, then back at Heart Chase.

"Two ponies versus an army of griffons aren't going to cut it. They need you." He levitated the armor around Heart Chase. "There are two wars on," said Star Heart. "The Griffon's War, and the war you helped start. Right now, you have the chance to end one of those wars, and without Bard, you won't be able to make it to Canterlot in time to stop the second. There are nightmares out there that can't be conquered by flashy tricks, brute force, and seductive wiles. Some pony needs to lead those three."

Heart Chase was the spitting image of her father in that armor. She remembered how proud Soul Chase was of being part of Celestia's guard, and how much it meant to him when she promised to take care of everything in his stead. She looked into a mirror, and saw the legacy of duty reflected back at her. In that moment, she forgot her fears. She had been wrong so many times in the past few months about everything. Now it was time to set things right.

"I'm ready," she said. "It's up to me now. I can't let them down. I can't fail father. I can't fail Celestia. I will lead them, and I will save Equestria from my mistakes." Star Heart nodded.

"If you're half the pony your father was, you'll be able to lead them into the mouth of hell and back," said Star Heart. "Good luck Heart Chase; you're going to need it."

Chapter 12

Fire in the Mountain

It was extraordinarily strange to gallop on a road of clouds. It didn't move like the ground did, and stallions worried constantly about outpacing the bank of fog that stretched like a rainbow underneath their hooves. To anyone who might have been watching, it was sort of absurd to watch two ponies running at breakneck speeds atop the insubstantial wisps of clouds that served as a road across the foothills and valleys of the griffon territories. Still, it was a thing of beauty to watch a coward and a hero gallop across the sky, even if no one was watching.

The gifts of the weather unicorn had proven to be valuable assets. Even if time wasn't of the essence, the shoes and fog stone made travel infinitely easier. It was easy to see why pegasi never stayed in the same place for long; it was easy to lose yourself to the elation of open sky and unlimited freedoms. Bard himself had a hard time not turning around and running the other direction from the tower full of griffons.

Truth be told, he was terrified. He kept telling himself that he was doing the right thing, that saving his friend and child was more important than letting fear take hold of him. But he knew in his heart that if Ridgeline weren't galloping beside him like a crusade of vengeance, he wouldn't be out here. If anything happened to him, there was a very real chance he'd just cut his losses and run. Bard wasn't ashamed to be a coward, but he would have been if he abandoned a pony he vowed to help. That didn't mean he wouldn't; he'd just feel terrible about it.

In Ridgeline's mind, there was no doubt. As the two stallions thundered across the fog bank, he thought of them as the righteous sword of Celestia. Even if he wasn't really a knight, even if Bard didn't worship his goddess, they were doing the right thing, and that's all that mattered. It didn't matter that there might be a thousand griffons in that tower; it didn't matter that they were only two ponies. They had the fury of righteousness at their hooves, and that was all they needed.

For an hour the ponies galloped toward the griffon spire, and for an hour

the fog stone created a road for them over the foothills and valleys of the griffon's territories. As they came close, Bard urged the stone to pour forth its clouds to mask their entrance. The fog rolled in around the base of the tower, and there the ponies rested for a moment. Soaked in sweat, the stallions again went over the plan, and prepared their route.

The only entrances to the rookery lay at the top of the spire, several hundred feet off the ground. The ponies would fill the valley in which the spire sat with fog, then walk up to the entrance level. The captured griffon had told them that every entrance was guarded by two griffons, and that if anything went wrong, they would raise an alarm that would bring an entire wing of griffons down on their location. The plan was to take out the two griffons there, then work their way to the upper level where Constance and Muffins would be held in wait for the griffon king, Phantasm.

With a grim determination, Bard turned the fog stone over in his hooves, and let it pour forth. Without the stone, they had only the overland route to get back to Hoofswell. Bard left it on the ground to make sure that he couldn't simply run away at the first sign of danger. He may have been a coward, but he also knew how to force himself to act. Clouds billowed from the stone, and joined the fog that already rested in the valley. After a few minutes, the spire became wrapped in a blanket of clouds so thick that none could see through it, and the shouting of griffons above echoed into the valley. The stallions took to the clouds and began to climb the tower.

Twenty miles away, Heart Chase had crested the ridge into the Griffon Kingdom, and watched as a pillar of cloud enveloped the rookery. Star Heart had told her it was twenty miles as the pegasus flies, but she was still to shaken to take to the sky along a bridge of clouds. Instead she cantered out upon the hills and valleys of the ground, and made her way to the tower. She only prayed to Celestia that the stallions would be able to hold their own until she arrived.

...

Constance's wings hurt. She wasn't sure she could fly yet, and that scared her more than she thought possible. He she was, trapped in a cell with a scared young filly, and she couldn't even fly to safety. Not that she would have been able to anyway; these cells were designed to hold pegasi for... whatever it was they did to them. She didn't even want to think about it.

What she did want to think of was a way out of this nightmare. If she could get free, then she knew she could outrun the griffins long enough to get out.

After that, she wasn't so sure. She knew she couldn't count on Bard; he was such a massive coward that he would run from the slightest sign of danger. Ridgeline had toppled over the edge of balcony, so he wasn't coming to save them either. Heart Chase... well, considering she couldn't be trusted, there was no reason to expect she'd come either. It was up to her to get herself and Muffins out of here.

Constance took an assessment of what she had going for her. She was alive, but had nothing on her. The griffons had taken her golden earrings, the bangles around her fetlock, and her scarves. She felt naked without them, though they were kind enough to leave her winter cloak. The fuzzy little pegasus didn't seem to mind the cold too much; she was too frightened by the unknown to worry about something silly like the cold. Still, what Constance needed most of all was a plan. She couldn't muscle her way out like Ridgeline could, nor could she use fancy magic like Bard. She did have something that none of her companions had though. All of the guards she had seen were males, and she knew thing or two about what griffons wanted.

She spent a few minutes preening her wings. Gina had once told her about what griffons liked, and a small part of her had filed that information away for a cloudy day. Today was that day, literally and figuratively. Clouds began to roll past the cell windows, and soon the air outside was thick as soup. Constance pulled out her braid, and with a shake of her head, let out her mane out to wave. She whistled at the guarding griffon, and he padded over to the cell to see what she wanted.

He was clearly younger than the massive griffin that had carried her and Muffins here; of a much lower rank too. Instead of the silver armor of the raiding party, he wore wooden vambraces around his front legs, and a wide brass collar that covered his torso. Still, he was attractive, and just the sort of client that Constance loved: young, naïve, and easily manipulated.

"Why hello there, handsome," purred Constance. "What's your name?" The griffon raised a suspicious eyebrow at the rose coated pegasus. Was she really coming on to him?

“Talos,” said the griffon. Constance put a hoof to her muzzle and giggled with a coy smile.

“Such a masculine name,” she said. “I bet all the gals love a strapping young thing like yourself.” She turned her hips to let the griffon get a better look at her curves. The griffin tried, and failed to not look. His eyes traced her curves, as she ran the tip of her tail underneath his chin. “Why I bet you’ve got a dozen griffinesses downstairs just lining up to get their claws on you.” She traced his height with her eyes, letting them linger on his flanks and feathered chest. “Mmm... I wouldn’t mind a piece myself.”

“N...no ma’am...” he stammered. She was coming on him! He shook his head; mustn’t fraternize with prisoners. “I mean... you stop that!” Constance only smiled and lowered her eyelashes.

“Oh Talos,” she purred. “You couldn’t be more obvious if you were wearing a sign. You don’t have to be shy, I can tell you’ve never been with a lady before. Come and let Miss Constance tell you a thing or two. I won’t bite.” She smiled a bit. “Not unless you want me too.” She leaned through the bars, and whispered in the griffin’s ear. He blushed enough that his red cheeks could be seen through his white feathers. The griffin fumbled with the keys as he went to unlock the cage.

“Ah, ah,” said Constance with a smile. “Don’t you think we should go into the next cell? I prefer privacy.” The griffin only nodded dumbly and opened the other cell door. As Constance walked from her cell, she traced her tail along the griffin’s chest. “I’m going to enjoy you for a while,” she said. The pegasus winked back at Muffins.

Muffins only blinked in confusion. She wasn’t really paying attention, but she did catch snippets of Constance’s whispering. The filly had heard a lot of those words before, just never put together like that. The ones she didn’t know sounded weird, and she wasn’t sure if she liked the sound of them.

For perhaps longer than was necessary, the next cell over was awash with muffled giggles, ruffled feathers, and the occasional squawk. There was a jingle and Constance’s tail wrapped round the corner. The jailer’s keys spun across the floor to Muffin’s hooves. So that nice griffin was going to let them go after all! She picked up the keys in her teeth, and unlocked her

cell.

Muffins went to the other cell to get Miss Constance, but she looked busy doing grownup stuff. She wandered down the hallway, looking for a way out instead.

...

There were certain advantages to having a younger pony's body. While Glaive wasn't exactly a spring chicken, that sixteen years of age difference made Iron Pick feel like a brand new pony. He only hoped that his arthritis riddled joints were killing Glaive. It would serve him right for taking his body in the first place. If it weren't for the fact that he was currently occupying the form of one of the most hated stallions in Equestria, he'd consider keeping it.

As Iron Pick cantered through the Everfree forest, he thought long and hard about what he was planning to do once he actually reached Canterlot. By himself, and especially with this younger body, he could easily reach Canterlot ahead of the Bridleburg army. However, getting anypony to listen to him was going to be a nightmare all its own. Unless he was able to find Lunar Rebellion sympathizers in Canterlot that didn't know of the body swap, he was going to be alone in a hostile city dressed in conspicuous armor. At least it fit well.

Iron Pick had been cantering through the forest for the past eight hours, and finally stopped to rest underneath a tree. His coat was drenched with sweat, but he wasn't sore like he expected. Iron Pick was glad that Glaive had managed to take care of his body; there was no way he could have done this in his own. He looked around the forest, and took in the unnatural landscape for a moment. When he was a colt, this forest was a wooded area outside the old capital. There was the occasional wild animal, and a tribe of Hamites that lived in the plains, but nothing like the untamed growth that had sprung up in the past few years.

Ponies had a theory that as unrest grew in Equestria, so grew the Everfree forest. Somehow, the trees were connected to the state of mental health of Equestria. If that had been true, it was easy to see why it had gone mad in the past five years. Endless wars had raged through a country that had known only peace since time immemorial. Only now had the wars almost

stopped. If it weren't for the Griffin wars up north, and the civil war he had sparked, Equestria might have been at peace long enough to remember what peace was like. Iron Pick hoped that he lived long enough to see Equestria united in harmony again.

A rustle of bushes not too far off set Iron Pick on high alert. Something or someone was approaching. Taking advantage of his dark armor, he hid among the shadows, and waited. From the bushes came a small herd of mules and donkeys. They were all universally grey, though some of the mules had cutie marks. Iron Pick watched them for a moment as they gathered firewood, and berries. What were they doing this far out in the Everfree forest?

Iron Pick remembered the fall of the capital, and how the Lunar Rebellion forces had a split a few days before the invasion. Mules and donkeys were being forced back into slavery by those driving the rebellion. The problem was that they had already given the lesser equines weapons and armor, and they weren't about to be put back under the yoke of slavery. They called themselves the Kin of Luna, and dedicated their lives to the goddess they had known before Nightmare Moon. Ponies had joined their ranks in the years since, and they kept to themselves in nomadic tribes. Except when they raided farms for food, they were harmless.

One of the mules stopped gathering firewood for a moment and stared in Iron Pick's direction. He held up a hoof to warn the others of danger, and pointed right at the unicorn.

"You there," he said. His voice was stately, and smooth as glass. He sounded as if he had been orating his entire life. "Come out of the bushes, traveler. We mean you no harm."

Iron Pick considered for a moment. Would they recognize him? Would they attack? He removed his helm, and appeared from the brush. The fillies and colts scrambled behind the adults as Iron Pick stepped out. Glaive's dark armor, with its scaled plates and menacing helm, gave Iron Pick the appearance of a warrior that had never seen peace. The mule took a step back from the armored unicorn.

"Glaive?" asked the mule. His eyes went wide with terror. He dropped into a defensive stance, and backed toward the woods. "D...don't come near me!"

I'll kill you if I have to! Get out of our forest! We will not be slaves again!"

"My name is Iron Pick, though that's not the form I'm occupying," replied the unicorn. "Glaive has stolen my body and is taking it to Canterlot at the head of an army. I'm going to try to stop him." Iron Pick looked over the cowering equines; was this really how Glaive had intended to rule Equestria? "I am just passing through; I mean you no harm."

"What army?" asked the mule. "There was a company of siege engines that rolled through the forest just north of here yesterday. They're probably only ten miles away, given how slow they are."

"Siege engines? Where the hell did..."

The answer hit him like apple dropped from a tree. Those were his siege ballista and catapults, and they were supposed to be for the defense of Bridleburg, not assaulting Canterlot. Once again, Iron Pick's foresight and planning, the two things that had made him successful, were coming back to bite him in the flanks. Iron Pick let out a heavy sigh.

"Can you take me there?" asked Iron Pick. The mule looked at him skeptically.

"What's in it for me?" he asked. Iron Pick raised an eyebrow. What sort of question was that? "Unicorns have been trying to enslave mules and donkeys for generations. Why should I help you? Why shouldn't I put you in chains instead?"

"I've never..."

"Maybe you haven't, but your grandfather, or your great grandfather has," said the mule. "Why do you think so many of us live in the forests? Or on the plains? It's to keep away from ponies so they don't slap us in irons and chain us to the plows. I ask again, why should I help you?"

Iron Pick really didn't have an answer to that. This mule was out here in the forests trying to provide for his family, and here he was, asking him for help. He hadn't intended to give the mule anything for his help, he had just expected it. Yet if the same mule had come asking him for assistance, he would have ignored him. The mule was right; he had no reason to help a

unicorn. Iron Pick had nothing he could offer him anyway.

He put his helm back on and cantered north to try to catch up with the siege company. Without the awesome firepower of the zebra weapons, Glaive would never be able to breach the palace walls, and he wouldn't be able to get to Celestia. How he intended to defeat an entire company of soldiers armed with catapults was something he'd have to consider on the way there.

...

Heart Chase cantered along the hills and valleys of the griffin territories as she raced for the fog bound spire of the griffins. She knew she was getting close as crested another hill, and found herself enveloped in the low hanging clouds. The tower lay somewhere in the distance, visible only as a shadow among the clouds. She plunged into the fog, and galloped for the tower.

Thick as the clouds were, Heart Chase seemed to know exactly where she was going. She hadn't worked up the nerve to start walking on the clouds yet, but she could get close to the spire base and search for a way up. Given that it was a griffin structure, the chances of it having such an entrance were slim. What griffin worth his feathers wouldn't want to fly? Heart Chase shuddered at the thought.

Around the base of the tower, she found the smoky quartz stone that had accompanied her along every step of this journey. Why had they dropped it? Were Bard and Ridgeline captured? She put the stone in her satchel, and looked around. From as far as she could see, there was nothing to indicate that an entrance existed anywhere below the skyline of this miserable place. Even if there were, she wouldn't be able to find it in all this fog. Out of options, Heart Chase looked to the sky and gulped. She'd have to climb the clouds upward.

Nearly a quarter mile above her, Bard was busy trussing up the two griffons that Ridgeline had incapacitated. Bard's illusions had caused a distraction long enough for Ridgeline to get the drop on the beasts. Ridgeline had come in from overhead and clapped their heads together like rocks grinding grain. They moved into the rookery, and slinked along the walls.

Despite the elevation and the climate, the rookery wasn't actually too unpleasant. Sure, it was chilly, but it was nothing like the blistering cold outside. The stallions looked around a moment as they tried to best gauge the way up to where the cages were supposed to be. Because the griffons were creatures of flight, stairs were almost nonexistent in this structure, but since they often captured ponies who didn't have wings, there was one set of stairs that led to the prisoner levels. It was guarded by two bored looking griffons, who were chatting about some of the fine chicks that were coming up into the ranks this year.

Distracted by the talks of gorgeous flanks and silky feathers, they failed to notice the ponies moving into position around them. Ridgeline put his griffon in a headlock, and held the beak with the other hoof. Bard's rope snaked from his pack, and spun like a tornado around the claws and beak of the other. The griffin struggled for moment or two against the earth pony's impossible strength before losing consciousness and slumping to the stone floor. Bard trussed the second griffon, and tied their wings together. It would be painful, certainly, but it wouldn't kill them. As silent as church mice, the stallions made their way up the stairs.

At the top the spiraling stair case, another griffin stood watching the hallway that led to the cells. With two pegasi in the cages, Phantasm would be making an appearance shortly. The griffin shuddered to think of what would happen to the poor mare. Still, it was either pegasi or griffins, and there had been too many griffins sacrificed to their dark king recently.

Maybe there was some other place he could go without that psychopath reigning over them. He didn't want his chicks growing up under this madness; there had to be other griffin rookeries. Those three dark griffins that the king kept couldn't be everywhere in the kingdoms, could they? The griffin snapped up from his thoughts to see the fuzzy little pegasus walking toward him with a big smile.

"How did you get out of that cell?" asked the griffin.

"Miss Constance let me out," said Muffins. "Mister Talos gave her the keys, and I walked over here." She sat down on the stone, and smiled up at the griffin. "Can you show me the way out? My daddy's going to be scared if I don't come home."

The griffin only stared in amazement at the pegasus filly. This child should have been terrified of a griffin, yet here she was, smiling and talking to him as if he were her best friend. The fuzzy strawberry pony hadn't learned fear yet. He thought for a moment about teaching her, but to scare the smile off her fuzzy cheeks would make him into the same sort of monster that ruled the griffins. He couldn't help but think of his chicks. They weren't much older than this filly; how could he sacrifice such an innocent soul to Phantasm?

"What's your name, little filly?" he asked.

"My name is Muffins," she said. "What's yours?"

"You can call me Manus," said the Griffin. Constance came trotting around the corner; Talos was following her like a puppy. Manus looked up at his friend's silly grin, and the pegasus sultry smile. He blinked in disbelief. That certainly explained how she had gotten the keys off him. Muffins fluttered up to Constance with a happy grin.

"Mister Manus is going to show us a way out!" said Muffins. "He's my new best friend just because he's so nice." Constance only smiled. Perhaps griffins weren't so bad after all.

Chapter 13

That Which Lies Beneath

Constance and Muffins walked with their two new griffon friends down the staircase of the rookery. Manus walked in front, and kept a look out for other griffins, while Talos walked behind the two pegasi. Constance's wings were still hurt, and she wouldn't be able to fly until she got some sort of medical attention. Fortunately, Manus's wife was a nurse, and once they visited the infirmary, they'd be able to get mares out of the rookery.

It wasn't until they ran nearly head first into Ridgeline and Bard that they actually had seen another soul. Ridgeline snapped into action, and tackled Manus before Constance had a chance to explain. Bard disappeared in a puff of smoke, and reappeared behind Talos to pop a bag over his head. Manus Tried to throw the stallion off him before Constance started yelling.

"Hold it!" screamed Constance. The males stopped fighting for a moment to stare at the mare. "Ridgeline, will you please stop strangling Manus? He's helping us." Ridgeline dropped the griffin with an unceremonious thud. "And Bard, take that bag off Talos's head." The unicorn took the bag off the griffin with an apologetic smile. Talos looked annoyed, but unharmed. Bard thought he smelled licorice on the bird, but he must have been mistaken.

"These two nice griffins are letting us go," said Muffins. "Mister Manus said that his little girls are my age and would love to play with a pegasus while their mommy fixes Miss Constance's wings." The pegasus bounced in place. "This is the best adventure ever!" Bard looked at Constance. She only smiled back at him.

"Well, sorry for all that," said Bard. "You're really helping her?" Manus adjusted his collar, and nodded.

"I can't do this anymore," said the griffin. "I've got a chick about her age, and if the situations were reversed, I'd hope that some pony would have enough kindness in their heart to let them go. I've had enough of Phantasm and his birdshit. There's enough misery in this world without him..." he shuddered in disgust at the thought. Ridgeline only shook his head.

“Griffins killed my entire family,” said Ridgeline. “You destroyed everything I ever had, and because of what you did, I have become a monster.” He poked the griffin in the chest with a hoof. “I don’t like you. I don’t trust you. If you make even one false move, I’ll snap your neck like a twig.” Muffins backed away in fright from the copper coated stallion. “You may be friends with Muffins, but you will never be anything but the enemy to me. Let’s go.” Talos moved to the front of flock while the two stallions took up the rear. After a few minutes of walking, they came to the housing level where the infirmary was located, and slipped inside.

Bard looked out at Rookery. The inside of it was a sort of grand dome that housed hundreds of holes, each presumably leading to a living area for each griffin family. Many families had decorated their entrances with gems or bits of precious metals, and each one seemed to reflect the families personality. What struck Bard as odd was the fact that so many of the homes didn’t seem to have anything indicating that anyone lived there except a pile of molted feathers. Something about the whole affair was unsettling, and he couldn’t put his hoof on it. He walked inside the infirmary, to find Manus’s wife yelling at the griffon for bringing the pegasus prisoner down to her.

“You’re going to get us killed!” she shouted. “You seen what Phantasm does, how could you?” She began weeping. “You’re going to kill us all and for what? To help some pegasus?” Manus shook his feathered head, and pushed Muffins in front of his wife.

“Gladus, this is Muffins,” he said. The filly hugged the despondent griffiness.

“You’re really soft Miss Gladus!” she said, as she rubbed her head against the griffiness’s feathers. “You’re all feathery and fuzzy, just like mommy used to be.” She looked up with a smile. “You smell nice too. We can be friends!” Gladus looked down on the fuzzy filly for a moment, before scooping Muffins up in her arms.

“Oh my god,” she said. “You’re just the most adorable little bundle of happiness.” She turned back to Manus with a look of serious concern. “You’re right. We can’t do this anymore. I’ll get the girls and we’ll leave. We’ll go anywhere but here.” She looked over Constance. “But we have to

get your wings fixed first. Come on; get in here before anyone sees you.”

No one had seen ponies enter the infirmary, just as no griffin had seen Heart Chase ascend to the top of the spire. She had to keep reminding herself that the shoes she wore were magic, and magic never failed. It never failed and left you to plummet a thousand feet into the ground where you might die on impact, or might just cripple you so that you lay there and suffer till some creature finds you and...

She shook the thoughts out of her head. She couldn't even see the ground, so it didn't matter. She came at last to a pair of trussed griffons who were struggling against a silk rope. Upon seeing Heart Chase walk up the clouds to their balcony, they tried to signal to her to let them go. Heart Chase only shook her head, and sauntered past them. At least she knew she was on the right path.

The entrance led to a massive dome that was covered in holes. It looked like an apartment complex of sorts. It actually made sense. Since griffins could fly, they could easily visit friends and family who lived just across the dome. It just seemed so... empty. There weren't any griffins flying around the inside the dome, and that worried Heart Chase. Not that she knew much about griffins, but they seemed sociable, and the lack of griffins in their home was unsettling to say the least.

The bottom of the dome was a massive circular flat section, around hundred and fifty yards wide and chiseled perfectly smooth. There was a fifty foot cylinder of stone in the center of the dome. From where she was standing, it looked like it had been covered in blood. She stepped toward it, when she heard something odd. Heart Chase tapped on the floor with a hoof. It echoed back with the hollow thump of stone. The entire base of the rookery was hollow. How the hell was this thing being supported?

“Not important,” said Heart Chase to herself. “Gotta find those ponies and get goin’ outta here. Celestia only knows what nightmares are lurkin’ in a place like this.” She trotted across the courtyard for a while before finding another pair of trussed up griffons hanging from a peg. They looked more annoyed than injured, and Heart Chase smiled to them as she passed. Behind them was the stairs, and Heart Chase happily ascended them.

Below, the shuffling of stone drew the attention of the two trussed griffins.

They stopped struggling for a moment, and turned to the center of the dome. The riser had slid to the side, and from it crept inky black tentacles of smoke. The griffons looked to each other in panic as they struggled against their bonds. Hard as they fought, they remained bound as the black tendrils rose up around them. If their beaks hadn't been bound, every creature in the dome would have heard their shrieks of agony as the smoke billowed around them.

...

Quill paced around his room in worry. If his brother and his sister in law had been traitors, then who else couldn't be trusted? Could he trust the guards who were there to keep him safe? Or the workers in the mines? Could he trust Red Chase? As if to answer his question, there was a knock on his door. He slipped a bladed boot onto his hoof before answering; it was only Red Chase.

"I got your message," she said. "And I came as fast as I could. What's wrong?" Quill couldn't think of a way to be polite about the subject. He took a deep breath, and spoke as plainly as he could.

"Where do your loyalties lie?" he asked. "If you care for me at all, you won't lie to me. Just tell me, who do you want to win this war?" Red looked confused at the question, then noticed the blade adorning Quill's fetlock. She backed away in fear.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "You're scaring me, Quill. Please tell me what's wrong."

"Answer the question," said Quill. "Just please answer the question. Where do your loyalties lie?"

"They're with Heart Chase," she said. "They've always been to her and the family. I'm loyal to you because of how much we've grown together during these past few months. Why are you asking me this? Put down the blade so we can talk, Quill. Please."

Quill looked at the bladed boot on his fetlock a moment before tossing it in the corner. He wrapped his arms around Red Chase with a relieved sigh. Red Chase only held her fiancée, and waited for an explanation. He let her

go a minute later, and escorted her inside his room.

"Your Aunt Apple is a traitor," he said at last.

"I know that," said Red Chase. "We all are."

"Not to Celestia," said Quill. "To us. She and Silk had planned to have us killed at the wedding so they could take over with Glaive and the Lunar Rebels. Our own family, Red. How could they do this to us?" Red shook her head in disbelief. That couldn't possibly be true.

"No," she said. "I don't believe it. That's not something Aunt Apple would do at all. You're lying. Why are you lying to me Quill? Why would you say things like that?" Quill passed the brass seal to Red Chase, along with a letter from Apple Chase. Red looked over the letter for a moment before she looked at the wax seal. It was a pick in front of a crescent moon.

She threw the letter to the ground amid the piles of ash that had gathered around Quill's trash can. It was then that she noticed the smell of smoke, and the familiar scent of burnt paper. Quill only hung his head.

"I didn't want to believe it either," he said. "This pile of ash is what remains of my brother's papers. I don't want to remember him as a traitor, so everything burns. I've kept that last letter to show to those who need to know, but everything else is gone. I'm sorry I frightened you, my dear Red. I don't feel like I can trust anyone anymore."

Red put her arms around Quill, and held him for a long time. If it had been a simple play for power, everything could have been forgiven, but their own family had tried to kill them. With Silk buried and gone, that left Apple Chase alone with the pony that had started this all. Red stepped away from Quill, and looked into his big green eyes.

"You're still loyal to me, right?" asked Red. Quill only kissed his fiancée in the moonlight. They could at least count on each other.

...

Iron Pick strode into the camp with his head held high, and his eyes narrowed in anger. A few ponies saw him, and recoiled in terror. A

turquoise earth pony came from a tent, and upon seeing Iron Pick, tried to duck back into it. Iron Pick reached out with his magic, and grabbed the earth pony. The earth pony struggled against the telekinesis, as he hung in the air ahead of Iron Pick.

“Solider,” he growled. “Get me the commanding officer of this company before I remove your intestines.” He dropped the pony to the ground with an unceremonious thud. The pony scrambled to his feet and dashed across the camp site to another tent. Iron Pick looked around at the ponies who stared. He snapped at them and began screaming.

“What kind of bullshit operation do you think we’re running here?” bellowed Iron Pick. “Are you sleeping? Get the hell up! I want every last one of you lazy bastards on your feet! Now!”

The camp became a flutter of activity as the company of ponies fell into formation. Armor had been hastily donned, and ponies scrambled to find their positions in line. A line of donkeys had formed at the back, cowering at the pony issuing commands like an enraged lion. The commander was a white pegasus that strode bleary eyed from his tent with some floozy unicorn by his side. He scrabbled backward in terror at the sight of Glaive in full armor, and full anger.

“S-s-sir!” said the pegasus. “We weren’t expecting to see you till Canterlot!”

“Then you are a failure and a fool!” bellowed Iron Pick. “Ready your ponies for inspection; then I will see if you’re fit to even make it to Canterlot.” He looked to the row of cowering donkeys. They had been beaten, and fairly recently. By Iron Pick’s guess, they were the ones hauling the cart filled with the siege engines, which meant he could count on them to help bring the weapons to Canterlot to aid in its defense. It made him think to the family of equines he had met in the forest a few hours ago. Yet another unicorn enforcing his will on others. He could take the hint that perhaps he should reexamine his life if he ever made it back to Bridleburg.

After a hasty few minutes, the troops had assembled for inspection in three rows of twenty. Iron Pick marched down the lines a few times before tearing into the three officers with a verbal tirade that made enlisted men flush with panic. He proceeded to move down the ranks, and berate every single pony for some fault or another with their uniform, their attitude, their

hygiene, whatever he could find. He spent a full hour berating sixty ponies, having dedicated exactly a minute to each and every one of them. By the time he was finished, the ponies looked as if they had been through a warzone.

“Now,” said Iron Pick at last. “Since you are the most useless bunch of ponies I have ever seen in my entire life, I give you a choice. I can hang half of you for running such a lousy operation, and let the rest of you watch as a reminder what happens to failure.” The ponies cringed at the thought. “Or, instead of wasting pony power, you can gather your worthless flanks and double time it north to rendezvous with the main force. I will take the siege engines there myself, so as not to taint them with your goddess damned failure!” He stared daggers into the herd. “I’m feeling generous. So you’ve got ten minutes to move out before I kill every last one of you.” The ponies exchanged looks for a moment. “I SAID MOVE!”

The ponies nearly tripped over each other to start breaking camp. Tents were hastily thrown down and gear collected in ramshackle piles as the ponies threw everything together to move out. In eight minutes the ponies were gone, leaving only fire rings and tent stakes. After another ten minutes, Iron Pick turned to the cowering donkeys.

“As for you lot,” said Iron Pick. “I’m not really Glaive. My name is Iron Pick, and that son of a bitch stole my body. I need to get to Canterlot with these siege weapons, and put them up in defense of the city. It’s going to be rough, and I apologize for that. But if you’re willing to serve Equestria for the next few days, I will guarantee your own land in Bridleburg. You don’t have to follow me, and you are free to go. I’ll burn whatever we can’t carry, but I need your help, and so does Equestria.” Iron Pick looked upon the donkeys who had stopped cowering for the time being.

“I realize that you’re suspicious of a unicorn, and with good reason,” said Iron Pick. “We have a habit of not keeping our promises, and forgetting what’s really important. But let me tell you, we are all equines here. Our country is not called Ponystan, it’s called Equestria. I realize it’s not perfect, but it’s a damn sight better than the Lunar Republic would be. So, I lay it at your hooves. Will you help me?”

Two of the donkeys looked to each other, and fled into the forests. The rest just stood there and considered the unicorn’s words. He was right; they had

no reason to trust him. But there was something in his speech that made them believe in what he had to say. And he was right about the Lunar Republic; they would be slaves under Glaive's rule. One of the donkeys stood and spoke for the group.

"We'll follow you," said the donkey. "But if you stab us in the back, Celestia help you, I will dedicate my soul to revenge." Iron Pick nodded.

"And I would deserve it," he replied. "Come my brothers; lend me a yoke. We've got to get to Canterlot."

...

Muffins and the two griffin chicks were playing hide and go seek in the back rooms of the infirmary. Each was a spitting image of their mother: fuzzy and feathery, with bright blue eyes and orange beaks. The children dashed around the halls of the clinic, and filled the rooms beyond with the echoes of carefree laughter. In the front room, Gladus applied a poultice to Constance's wings. She winced as the griffon pulled a few damaged feathers.

She wasn't in that bad of shape, and she'd probably be able to fly sometime tomorrow. Until then, they'd have to travel along the ground. When Bard explained how they'd gotten up the spire, she was even more impressed by Star Heart's magic than she had been previously. That unicorn could apparently work wonders. When she asked about Heart Chase, she was only met with shrugs of indifference.

"She's a traitor," said Bard. "We can't trust her to help us, and we can't imagine that she'll come to help us either."

"Aren't you a traitor too?" asked Ridgeline. "You were part of the Lunar Rebellion, weren't you?" Bard fell silent in his admonishment of Heart Chase. The stallion had a point. Still, the prospect of stranding her in Hoofswell had crossed his mind. Bard may have been a traitor, but he had been on the losing side of that conflict, which made it sort of alright years later. Or at least, that's what he told himself.

A thump and shuffle from the hall outside set the room on high alert. Gladus huddled the children in the back while Talos went out to investigate

the noise. The griffin peered down the aisle of holes along the balcony of the dome. From the level above came the sound of metal on stone. Something heavy was headed for the prison levels.

“I think we should leave now,” said Talos. “If you ponies can cloud walk, there’s an exit one level below us. We should be okay, so long as whatever is up there doesn’t make a u-turn.”

The herd fluttered and shuffled out of the clinic and down the stairs to an open door. The ponies stared out into the dissipating fog bank for a moment. It seemed spongy, and not nearly as solid as it had on the journey here. Not only that, it was beginning to get dark. Bard cursed these short northern days, and the chill weather that was sapping the cloud’s density. The ponies moved out into the clouds, and immediately began to descend. The clouds just weren’t dense enough to hold the magic of the boots very well, and Bard cursed himself for leaving the fog stone running. It was probably depleted by now, and they’d have a hell of a time navigating to the bottom if they were sliding around like a foal on ice skates.

After about twenty seconds of sliding down, the clouds stopped supporting their weight entirely. The earth pony and unicorn dropped ten feet onto the bottom platforms of the dome. Constance glided to the bottom platform, and Muffins fluttered down to the herd with a grin.

“Silly,” she said. “That’s not how you cloud walk.”

As the griffins began to take flight, another noise, this one a shuffling and windy whisper, echoed from the level below the exit. Talos nodded to Manus. As the rest of the griffons left, Talos crept down the stairs to investigate the noise. He reached the platform for the next level, and glanced into the dome. Nothing there. He was about to head back up the stairs, when he felt the air inside the dome chill from balmy to icy. The griffin froze in place as the black tendrils closed in around his claws.

It was the blood curdling screams that alerted Heart Chase to the presence of someone else in the dome. She had made it to the empty detention levels, and was getting ready to turn around when the cries of anguish echoed through the dome. They weren’t the screams of a pony; they were something else entirely. She galloped down the stairs to investigate, praying that whoever was in pain wasn’t her friends.

The ponies had walked back inside the dome to avoid outside detection. The clouds were settling down into the valley, though they were about fifty feet of open air between them and the clouds. They'd have to wait for the griffons to lower them. The ponies heard the scream coming from the stairs, and immediately surrounded Muffins. Muffins hugged the leg of the pegasus as the sounds of a hundred pairs of beating wings filled the skies outside, and the sounds of hundreds of marching hooves echoed from the center of the dome.

From the center of the dome, tendrils of black smoke snaked from the massive hole in the floor. Hundreds of ponies, each darkened and emaciated as if they had been consumed by fire and resurrected, shuffled from the hole in the ground. A wisp of black smoke drifted in from the stairs to join the miasma of black fog that began to take shape upon the floor of the dome.

Before their eyes, the shape of a massive black griffin formed, and coalesced into being. His form was gaunt, skeletal almost, and his wings were a menagerie of multicolored feathers that had once belonged to pegasi. Across his chest were massive scars where feathers no longer grew, and adorning his flank were thousands of cuts that dripped with ichor. Plates of a familiar silver armor had fused with the griffin's body along his arms and back like some macabre body modification. His voice was little more than a harsh breeze filtered through a fan, but it boomed and echoed through the dome as if delivered by a beast ten times his size.

"I am the Phantasm," said the creature "I will come to Canterlot and take the sun, as I took the moon. All share fear, and all shall obey."

Chapter 14

The Battle of Nightmares

Bard really tried to keep it together, but behind the bravado he was a coward at heart. Despite his friendship to the ponies that stood with him, the unicorn turned tail and fled. He dove off the side of the spire, and hoped for the best among the clouds below. The other ponies were about to follow suit when the deafening flap of a hundreds of wings filled the foggy sky. Hundreds more emaciated griffins emerged from the fog like a swarm of hornets. The ponies backed away from the exit as they descended upon the spire to block every single exit. Manus's family dropped to the platform and scampered inside with the ponies as the shrieks and squawks of the black swarm drowned out every other thought. They five adults corralled the children to the center of them, and prepared to fight.

Ridgeline assessed the situation. With the hundreds of ponies that had taken formation behind Phantasm, and the hundreds of griffins outside, there was no chance for them. Even if he lost control, he maybe could take out a few dozen, but even he would fall eventually. Still it might be enough if he could clear a path for the rest of his herd.

"They're not attacking," said Constance. Ridgeline glanced at the griffins that blocked the exits. They were unmoving, except for the screeching of terror. The blackened ponies also stood unmoving, as if waiting for Phantasm to give them the word to destroy. The emaciated griffin unfurled his multicolored wings and chuckled at the ponies.

"Come ponies," he whispered. "Join my army. There is a place in the court of Phantasm for you all. I will take your princess, and I will remember those who have helped me." Ridgeline pushed the herd behind him as he approached the nightmare griffin.

"I don't know who you are," he said, "and I don't care where you've come from. The griffins are my enemies; they've killed everyone I've ever loved. So if you think I'm going to join you, you've got another thing coming." He stomped a hoof. "I swear on Celestia's horn that you will not lay a talon on

my friends.”

Phantasm chuckled at the bravado of the stallion, and let a cloud of black tendrils roll from the smoke around his feet. The tendrils crept across the floor, and wrapped in an oily mist around Ridgeline’s fetlocks.

“Stupid pony,” snickered the nightmare. “You will join me whether you want to or not. I am the Phantasm, and all will obey.”

The smoke rose in an oily cloud to overtake Ridgeline. Gladus gasped in horror while Manus covered his children’s eyes. They knew what was coming, and even if they couldn’t stop it from happening to them, they could at least shield their child from the horror for another moment.

As the cloud dissipated around Ridgeline, the armored stallion stood unphased by the dark magics. His grey eyes only stared into the bright glow of Phantasm’s eyes. For a moment, he swore Phantasm looked shocked.

The griffins stared in amazement. There should have been screaming as Phantasm took his soul. The copper coated stallion should resembled the charred husks of ponies that stood as a legion behind the nightmare griffin. Instead he stood defiant of the nightmare griffin. The demon Phantasm had been unable to take control of Ridgeline.

“Is that the best you’ve got?” asked Ridgeline.

Phantasm’s scream sent the ponies and griffins to the ground, holding their ears. The deafening scream shook the very walls of the dome, and rattled debris from the ceiling of the chamber. Ridgeline only stood in defiance of the beast and his roar. An unchivalrous thought passed through his head that told him to attack while the beast was trying to scare him. He thought it was a damn good idea. Ridgeline barreled at the nightmare griffin with the cry of Celestia on his lips.

The blades adorning Ridgeline’s fetlocks swiped through the feathers of Phantasm as a colt ploughs through a piñata. The impossible strength of Ridgeline took the creature by surprise, and knocked him off balance. Phantasm stumbled backwards and fell down the open hole where he had emerged. There wasn’t enough room for him to spread his wings, and the

shadow griffin plummeted into the spire. Ridgeline only scoffed. So much for Phantasm. He turned his attention the shrieking griffons outside when a rush of oily smoke shot past him and toward his friends.

Ridgeline jumped atop the cloud. His magic boots found purchase in the smoky demon and shoved it to the floor inches away from his companions.

“Run, damn it!” yelled Ridgeline.

The griffins and ponies bolted for the stair case and began winding their way upstairs as the griffin again coalesced into form. Ridgeline brought down both hooves in an overhead smash that drove the demon’s head into the floor. The silver helm of the demon staved under the attack and Ridgeline pressed the advantage. He turned and bucked the shadow griffin in the beak, sending shattered pieces of it flying.

“Not so tough are you?” taunted Ridgeline. “I recognize your armor, fiend. You’re no Nightmare Moon. Your demon is trapped on the moon and it left your body to rot here.”

“Nightmare Moon was a part of me before she left for that bitch goddess of yours!” shrieked Phantasm. “I will again have the body of a goddess, and I will kill all those who stand in my way!”

The griffin swiped at Ridgeline with talons that caught in his armor. The creature drug Ridgeline across the floor with his massive size, and threw the pony into the lines of the ponies that waited behind him. Ridgeline flattened a unicorn that didn’t so much as squeak in protest. They simple stood there, as if nothing around them mattered at all. Ridgeline shook off the beating, and stood again.

Phantasm plowed through the line of ponies as if they were a field of bowling pins. Ridgeline ducked under the snapping beak, and bucked the griffon in the chest. His hooves caught in the breastplate of the beast, and sent it spiraling out of the crowd of charred ponies. Ridgeline leapt over the crowd to deliver the final blow to the griffin when it again dispersed into a cloud of oily smoke. Ridgeline snorted and spun to face the cloud

From that cloud of smoke, a talon raked across the front of his barding, and scratched the chest plate. The claws were sharp, but they had no force

behind them. Ridgeline almost chuckled; sure he couldn't do much to a cloud of smoke, but it also couldn't hurt him. This fight was already over and Phantasm had lost. It wasn't until the cloud took form again that the stallion realized how wrong he had been.

The cloud weaved around Ridgeline as if it were a humming bird. It paused to take shape again, and battered the stallion with furious kicks, or a scything talon. It moved with the nimbleness of a butterfly, dodging and weaving away from Ridgeline's thundering hooves, and struck with the force of a wrecking ball, denting his armor, and sending him skidding across the floor. The smoke flitted in front of Ridgeline for a final time, and took on the full griffin form to deliver a two-taloned uppercut that sent Ridgeline down in a heap among the lines of ponies.

Ridgeline tried to stand again. He steadied himself on the flank of a pony that stood there, and readied himself for another beating. He felt weakened by the assaulted, as if each hit had taken from him a part of his being. Maybe it had, but he knew one thing: the griffin was panting. All those fancy tricks with the smoke and claws had worn him out, and it gave Ridgeline a much needed second to breathe. Something caught his eye on the flank of the filly in front of him.

Beneath the char and ash that covered the ponies there were cutie marks. Every pony here had one. They hadn't been burned. They weren't dead. They had just been taken over. These ponies were still alive under there. The cutie mark he saw on the flank of the filly in front of him was unmistakable which is why it caught his eye. It was a simple patch of fabric lined along the edges with stitching.

It was his sister. She had been frozen in time as a filly, but it was unmistakably Patches. His family wasn't dead and the griffins hadn't killed them. They'd been enslaved for ten years, and it was the doing of this thing that stood before him. Ridgeline narrowed his eyes at the charging Phantasm. In all the years he had been fighting, he had never really hated his enemy, not even the griffins. The demon in his head had always provided whatever anger he felt, but now as unbridled rage filled the stallion, he spit out his mouth guard and bit down on his tongue. As the maddening taste of blood filled his mouth, the demon inside demanded control. For the first time in his life, he welcomed the demon to his mind, and gave him control.

The baying of a nightmare echoed from the dome as the ponies and griffins climbed the stairs to get away from Phantasm. They came at last to a balcony overhanging the dome where they stopped to look down on Ridgeline. He appeared to be battering Phantasm into submission with vicious blow and bites that stained the dome floor with black ichor. So entranced by the copper stallion's combat, the flock barely heard the approaching shriek of griffins.

A dark griffin nearly twice the size of Ridgeline battered through the throngs of smaller griffins guarding the exits. On either side was another griffin that shared the same burnt feathers and blacked fur of their larger captain. Gladus, Constance, and Manus put themselves between the dark griffins and the children. There was no banter; only the soulless hatred that hung behind glowing black eyes of the griffins. They moved in for the kill and the flock charged in to meet them.

Gladus dodged and weaved around the talon swipes and rear claws of the dark griffin. She ducked under a claw and came up with a talon full of powder from her bag of medicine. Whatever it was, it stuck to the glowing eyes of the dark griffin and sent it shrieking backwards in pain. Gladus charged the beast and tore through its feathers protecting its neck with a single swipe. The dark griffin swatted with a useless talon as the griffoness clamped her beak across its neck. In a spray of black ichor, the griffin thrashed and squawked in terror. Gladus swiped a talon across the griffin's throat and tore it from his body.

Constance ducked under the talons of the smallest dark griffon. She pivoted with the grace of a dancer and bucked the creature in the beak. Stunned, the griffin stumbled backwards as Constance reared up. A right hoof across the temple sent the beast tumbling to the floor in a heap and Constance assured that it would stay down with another vicious stomp to the head. For as much of a lady as she appeared to be, the rose coated pegasus was certainly unrelenting when pressed. She moved to help Manus with the massive griffin.

Manus had not fared as well against his opponent, and his white feathers had been stained red with his own blood. He stood defiant as the massive griffon battered and clawed at him in a vain attempt to get at the chicks and filly. Manus struck back when he could but the sheer size and strength of

the dark griffin was taking its toll, and he wouldn't be able to stand much longer. The dark griffin raised a talon to strike the final blow when a buck from a rose colored hoof sent him flying.

Heart Chase had heard the baying of terror from far below, and it set her fur standing. She had heard that sound before, and she knew that Ridgeline had lost control. She only hoped that Bard's trick worked again, and that she would be able to save her friends. The word didn't even seem contrived anymore. These ponies were her friends. Even if she had lied to them, even if she hadn't trusted them in the past, they were her friends and she was going to save them all. She barreled out of the stairwell and onto the platform with Constance and some griffin were locked in battle with a massive black griffin. Neither one looked to be doing too well. She continued her gallop across platform and leaped atop the beast.

With a pony on his back, a griffin on each side, and pegasus bucking him the face, the griffin finally began to realize he was losing. He swatted the pegasus away and charged for the children instead. Heart Chase wrapped her arms around the griffin's giant neck and heaved to the side. Like an out of control bull, he listed to the right, and smashed into the platform in an explosion of feathers. Heart Chase rolled away from the beast, and slid next to Constance. The children scurried into the air behind the griffins.

Among the flying species, attacking the wings was considered poor form and the sign of dirty fight. Heart Chase didn't know this at all, and had no compunctions about latching her teeth onto the dark griffin's wing, then breaking it with a vicious kick. The snapping of hollow bones was met with a universal cringe from those with wings and as the beast bellowed in pain, Heart Chase swung herself around to break the other wing. The screeching reached deafening levels as Heart Chase rolled from his back and onto the platform. With the snap of teeth, the armored earth pony grabbed the creature's broken wing and rolled backward off the platform with him.

Without even thinking, Constance dove off the edge platform after her. Heart Chase kicked free of the beast and into the gliding hooves of the pegasus. She couldn't fly, especially with the added weight of an armored pony, but she managed to slow their descent. The dark griffin didn't fare near as well and plummeted to the ground, then through the thin stone floor. Gladus tried to grab Muffins as she barreled over the side after the mares, but the griffin couldn't lay a talon on the fuzzy filly.

In the mean time, Bard had gathered what nerve he had, and began building a staircase of clouds back to the spire entrance. He prayed to Luna that his friends were still alive, and they wouldn't hate him for what he'd done. As he jumped to the entrance platform, the massive griffin punched through the floor of the dome, and continued screeching as he fell to his demise. A moment later the two mares floated to the floor, followed by Muffins. They all appeared to be safe and sound.

Behind them, Ridgeline had become a copper blur of blades and teeth. Ichor sprayed the room as the bladed fetlocks of the berserk pony carved through the multicolored wings of Phantasm. The armored plates that had fused with the beast were shattered by the hammer blows of Ridgeline's hooves, and the creature was barely maintaining a sense of coherence. Ridgeline reared up and stomped the griffin's head to the ground with both hooves. He raised a bladed fetlock above his head, and brought it down on the feathered neck of the nightmare creature with a sickening crunch of bone and feathers.

From the shattered remains of the creature rolled a cloud of black mist, and the air filled with the screams of souls that left the shattered form of the griffin. Each soul took the form of a pale cloud as it flitted back to its body, and the char began to fall away from every pony and griffin who had suffered under Phantasm's cruelty. Life filled the dome as the colors returned to those who been taken. Ridgeline looked at the masses of ponies gathered before him, and saw only victims.

There are more now. Kill them all. Let the blood flow. Fill this house with the screams of pain. Those ponies will fight, Kill them first, and then slaughter those who stand there uselessly. Do as I command. I control you.

Bard reached out with his magic and touched upon the mind of his berserk friend. The demon was louder than ever before and the howling insanity forced Bard out of the stallions mind. The shriek that filled his mind sent him to the floor in agony. Ridgeline turned to the unicorn that had tried to shut him down, and charged. The mares moved to defend Bard, knowing they couldn't stand against the monster that had taken control.

It was Muffins who shot out from behind the mares and slammed into Ridgeline. The fuzzy little pegasus moved with such speed and at just such

an angle that she knocked Ridgeline off his hooves and onto his back. She stood atop his chest with a smile.

“You beat him!” she said. “You beat the mean ol’ griffin!”

Kill her. She is the enemy. No one is your friend, kill them all. Start with her, and let the blood flow. She is not your friend.

“SHE IS TOO MY FRIEND!” shrieked Ridgeline. He raised his hooves above the pegasus, and pulled her into an embrace. His eyes drained from black to their sad grey as the demon lost control of his body and let Ridgeline back in. He sobbed as he held the pegasus in his arms. There was something that could beat the demon, so it seemed.

Muffin’s unrelenting gift of friendship had saved them all.

Chapter 15

Reunion

For the almost a decade, Ridgeline believed that his surviving the firebombing of Hoofswell had been some sort of cruel punishment for the sins he would later commit in life. In a lot of ways, it would have been easier to have been an orphan from birth than to have your family turned to ash in front of you.

Some ponies had been here since the beginning, while others were here from as recently as a few weeks ago. It was as if the time had stopped for them when the cloud took their souls. Their bodies and minds remained preserved by the dark magic of Phantasm's demon, just as they had left the world. Ridgeline sat with his pony friends, and stared out at the crowd.

"He told me some things," said Ridgeline. "He said that Nightmare Moon had been in him until he found Princess Luna. That he was going to march on Canterlot with his army." He looked to the hundreds of ponies who wandered the dome. "I guess that's not happening."

"You could have been killed," said Heart Chase. "Yah didn't know how strong Phantasm was, and yah didn't know that killing him would free all those ponies. Why did you do it?" Ridgeline looked confused at the question.

"You mean you wouldn't have?" he asked. "Ponies like me are a bit a dozen. We fight, we die, we're sometimes remembered. I was born to fight." Heart Chase only shook her head.

"No pony is born to fight," said Bard. "Something made you the way you are now, but whatever it was, it's not who yah were meant to be."

"If I'm not born to fight then who am I?" asked Ridgeline. "Killing's all I've ever been good at. I got my cutie mark for killing a griffin, for Celestia's sake."

"So you've had a rough time," said Heart Chase. "Ain't no one's life easy,

specially not these ponies.” Ridgeline looked out to the crowds. So many faces were indistinct memories from nearly a decade ago, yet here they all stood, as if only their location had changed.

“Do you think we should tell them what’s going on?” asked Ridgeline. “They’ve been enslaved for a decade by that monster. How do you tell a pony something like that?”

“Well, you start with the truth,” said Heart Chase. “Come on, these are yer ponies aren’t they? We can tell them together.” She stood atop the stone cap, and cleared her throat. “If y’all would bring it in here for a minute so we can explain what’s goin’ on here?” bellowed Heart Chase. The ponies stopped wandering in a daze for a moment to look upon the two Celestial Knights who seemed to take charge.

“Now, I know y’all are wonderin’ how you got up here, and what’s goin’ on with all this nonsense,” said Heart Chase. “I ain’t got an explanation fer yah, but it had somethin’ to do with that griffin Phantasm. Ya’ll seemed to wake up when he died, so I’m thinkin’ that’s what happened.”

“Phantasm had taken your souls to try to fill the hole where his should have been,” said Manus. The ponies recoiled at the griffin who stood beside Heart Chase, but she didn’t seem in the least bit worried about him. “For years we brought ponies to him so that he wouldn’t take us instead.” He gestured out to the bewildered griffins behind him. “As you can see, it didn’t work. We let a monster take over our lives, and you have all paid the price for our failure. I’m sorry that we weren’t strong enough to stand up to him, and that it took ponies to show us how much we had failed.” He ceded the floor to Heart Chase.

“Well thank yah,” said Heart Chase. “So that’s what happened, I guess. Now, my friend here says he knew some of yah, and that yah been under that demon’s spell for the past ten years. Equestria has changed a lot since then, and well, it ain’t for the better.” She looked to Ridgeline, who only nodded. “I guess I’m gonna start at the beginning, so if ya’ll wanna know, bring it in close cause it’s gonna be a long story.”

For an hour, Heart Chase explained what had happened in the time since their imprisonment. She explained how Luna became tainted by Nightmare Moon, and how two years of the Lunar Rebellion and five years of the

goddesses' absence had left Equestria in tatters. She explained how Hoofswell had become a bitter wasteland of a city, and how the ponies of New Hoofswell had nothing but hate in their hearts.

Heart Chase looked out to the crowd of ponies with a heavy heart. Tears of sorrow filled the eyes of ponies as she explained Celestia's absence. Others quaked with the fear of the unknown, and still other trembled with rage at what Equestria had become. She took questions from the ponies, and offered what information she could. In a way, she was happy to serve these ponies. Much like foals, the world around them was new and unforgiving. Certainly some of them had decades of experience to help them, but the world outside the spire was a different place from the one they knew, and awaiting them in Hoofswell was hard work and sacrifice to rebuild the world they left behind.

Sitting in a close huddle were five ponies. The two colts had boulder cutie marks and bore muted tan coats, much like their father. The mother bore a scarlet coat, and had a cutie mark of a needle and thread. The youngest child, a copper coated filly, wore a sewn patch on her flank. They were looking for someone among the ponies, but had no luck finding who they were looking for. Ridgeline only watched them with a sad eye. Constance put a hoof on his shoulder, and looked at the family.

"They're looking for you," said Constance.

"I know," replied Ridgeline.

"So go talk to them," said Constance. "They'll want to know what's happened. Everypony here will want to know what's happened."

"I can't," said Ridgeline. "I've become a monster; it's best they remember me for who I was, rather than what I've become." Constance only shook her head.

"You freed them, Ridgeline," she said. "Even if you didn't know what you were fighting for, you saved an city from an eternity of bondage under... whatever that thing was. Look around you. Griffins are apologizing for what happened. Ponies are finding loved ones they thought died years ago. Muffins even found her mother. Everypony here gets a reunion. Why not you too?"

"I'm not worthy," said Ridgeline. "The only reason I was able to beat that thing was because I'm cursed. My family are rock farmers; I'm a possessed solider. We have nothing in common now, even if we are flesh and blood." Constance only shook her head, and went to check on Bard.

The unicorn still had an unbelievable headache from the demon's screech. Blood had matted around his ears, and he had a hard time hearing what Constance was trying to tell him. He thought it weird when she hugged him and said thank you.

"Why?" said Bard. "I ran away like the coward I am. I've done absolutely nothing helpful in the past few hours."

"You came back, that's why," said Constance. "You were scared and you ran, sure, but you came back. You wouldn't abandon your friends, even if you were terrified." She looked back to Heart Chase. "And I think we both owe her an apology." Bard nodded, and got to his feet.

Because she wore the armor of a knight and spoke like a politician, many ponies thought that the two knight ponies had been sent to free them by Celestia. She had to explain that again and again that nopony had seen their beloved princess in years. Heart Chase was busy fielding question from the ponies about the state of the world when her friends walked up to her.

"Can we talk?" asked Constance.

"Certainly, citizen," said Heart Chase. She coughed, and corrected herself. "Sorry 'bout that. What can I do fer yah?"

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry for not believing in you," said Constance. "When I was captured, I thought Bard would come to my rescue or that Ridgeline would storm the spire to save us." She looked at the ground. "And they did, but it was you who came for us after all. I didn't trust you and I didn't have faith. I'm sorry Heart Chase. I should have known you were a friend." Heart Chase only shook her head.

"No, I should apologize to you," she said. "I wasn't honest with yah about what happened because I didn't trust you. And I didn't trust yah because

that's just what ponies do these days. That happens too much, and I let things get the better of me. I'm proud to call you folks my friends, and I'm glad that yer all okay."

They shared a hug and as they embraced, Muffins came fluttering over to join them. Trailing behind her was a strawberry coated pegasus who was just as fuzzy as her daughter. She approached the three ponies with a bow.

"I understand I have you to thank for rescuing me and my daughter," said the pegasus. "Is there anything I can do to repay you for what you've done?" Constance only shook her head.

"What Muffins has given us is far greater than anything you could possibly reward us with," said Constance. "Without her, I don't think we could have stopped Ridgeline. Her relentless friendship is magic in the way it affects ponies. If you would do anything for us, it'd be to make sure she never loses that spirit." Constance hugged the fuzzy filly. "And maybe get her a coat clipping once spring comes around."

Bard looked back to Ridgeline as he sat alone near the wall. He was lying with his head in his hooves as he watched a family in the crowd. He looked to them, then back at the stallion. The resemblance was uncanny. Why hadn't he gone over there? Bard trotted to the family with a smile.

"How are you doing?" asked Bard. "I'm sure this is all kinds of traumatic."

"We're fine," said the stallion. "You didn't happen to see a copper coated colt with a pile of rocks as his cutie mark, did you?" he asked. "I mean, the rest of us are here, I thought..." his voice trailed off. "Well I don't know what I thought."

"You're looking for Ridgeline, right?"

"Do know what happened to him?" asked the stallion.

"Well, he wasn't with you when Hoofswell burned," said Bard. "He survived the firebombing, and he's spent the past decade being a soldier." He glanced back at the armored stallion that was fielding questions from some other ponies. "He's not your little colt anymore. It's been a rough life for him, and he's endured things that no pony should have to. What's

happened to him over the past few years has been nothing short of a nightmare, and he thinks he's a monster for it." Bard shook his head, and took a deep breath. "Underneath that armor plating is a scared colt who just wants his family back."

"What's happened to my little colt?" asked the mare.

"The stuff of nightmares," said Bard. "He needs a family now. Even if he thinks he's unworthy, he needs you."

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Iron Pick pulled as hard as any of the donkeys that hauled the carts through the woods. He'd occasionally stop to blast a path for them with a swipe of his horn, but he pulled his own weight and more, as if he was trying to prove that he wasn't just full of lies and broken promises. They didn't complain.

The wagon train of war machines crested a final hill and came to the edge of the treeline. They had cleared the Everfree forest in a single night by destroying half the cargo, and taking shifts. Below them was the tiny hamlet of Ponyville, and few hours walk beyond that, the city of Canterlot. The donkies gasped in amazement at the castle's moonlit silhouette. Most have never come this far east, and they certainly had never seen the castle on such a beautiful fall evening. If it weren't for the visage of Nightmare Moon glaring upon them from the heavens, they'd almost say it was peaceful. Iron Pick slowed to a stop and unhitched his cart.

"I'm going to head into town, and see if I can scare up some food for us all," said Iron Pick. "Stay here, and wait for me, but if you hear trouble start heading for Canterlot. I shouldn't be more than an hour." With that, the unicorn trotted down the hill, and into the hamlet.

Ponyville was a quiet and unassuming settlement on the edge of the Everfree forest. It used to be that it sat on an endless plain, just another insignificant speck on the map of Equestria. But with the expansion of the Everfree forest, and the new capital of Canterlot, the town began to grow as an important stopping point for ponies on their way anywhere. Iron Pick came to the door of an inn, and stepped inside.

It was quiet here. There were two mules sitting in silent misery at corner table. Iron Pick ignored them, and rapped a hoof on the counter. A purple unicorn stallion poked his head up from beneath the bar, and blinked the sleep from his eyes. Iron Pick only cocked an eyebrow and sighed.

"I need a day's food and water for a dozen donkeys," said Iron Pick.

"That's a lot of supplies for one pony," yawned the unicorn. "You gonna carry that yourself?" Iron Pick cursed himself for not bringing the cart. Then again, all of the carts were full of siege engine parts, so perhaps it's best that he didn't. He looked to the mules a moment, and walked over to them.

"Are you gentlecolts interested in making a few bits?" asked Iron Pick. The mule looked over the armored unicorn with a skeptical eye.

"What do you need?" asked the mule.

"I need supplies carried about a half mile out of town to my wagon train," said Iron Pick. "I'll pay you both ten bits."

"Why should we trust a unicorn?" said the other mule.

"Because I'm just passing through," said Iron Pick. "It's an easy ten bits; do you want the money or not?" The mules shrugged and collected the supplies the inn keep brought up from the basement. Iron Pick tossed a few bits at the unicorn and was headed for the door when the inn keep spoke up again.

"Anypony tell you that look like a demon in that armor?" he asked.

"That's probably because the owner of it is a demon," said Iron Pick.

He left the inn with the two mules at his sides. Though it was a short walk, the mules pestered him about why he was carrying so many supplies out to the edge of the forest. Their tone worried Iron Pick, as it was one of fear rather than curiosity. Had unicorns become such a boogie-pony among other equines that they couldn't be trusted at all? The fact that mules and donkeys thought he was a monster just because of his horn made him fearful for the future. If the equines couldn't trust each other, then what hope was there for Equestria even if Heart Chase and the other ponies

managed to figure out how to bring Celestia back?

They arrived at the wagon train and unloaded the supplies they had brought. The mules questioned why an armored unicorn was leading a wagon train made entirely of donkeys toward Canterlot. Iron pick shrugged and offered an explanation.

“Things are going to get ugly in the next day or two,” said Iron Pick. “I only hope I can put a stop to this madness before it gets out of control and destroys Equestria.”

“What does that mean?” asked the mule.

“It means that war is coming,” said Iron Pick. “A battle for Canterlot is coming through the forest, and without equines fighting as one, Canterlot will fall. If you value Equestria at all, you’ll gather anyone willing to fight, and join us.” Iron Pick levitated his yoke over his head. “If not, then I suggest you find a nice basement to cower in, because an army is headed this way. We’ll see you in Canterlot. Move out!”

The wagons rolled again as the herd of donkeys marched toward the castle. The mules looked at each other a moment, then back to Iron Pick as he led the train away from Ponyville into the mountains of Canterlot. The grey mule turned and started galloping for home.

“Where are you going?” asked the brown mule.

“That pony was right; Equestria needs everyone,” said the grey mule. “You saw the knights coming back through here. You know as well as I do that war is coming.”

“What if those donkeys were slaves?” asked the brown mule.

“When’s that last time you saw a unicorn in a yoke?” asked the grey mule.

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Glaive stared at the bodies of the ponies that hung from the tree with maddening rage. These four so called officers had been duped so easily by Iron Pick that they gave up the siege weapons they were hauling and just

walked straight north to meet the rest of the army. He had personally choked the life out of the commander pegasus, but had the body hung with the other officers from the company to demonstrate to everypony in his army the price of failure. As for the rest of the company, they had followed orders like obedient soldiers, and obedience was all he asked of his grunts. He turned away from the hanging ponies as they struggled for life.

“Now we see the price of failure,” said Glaive to his assembled army. “These ponies have let the enemy escape with support that would have aided us in victory. Because of the actions of these four ponies, more of our lives will be lost.” He shook his head and raised a hoof to the sky. “I urge you to examine your ranks. Look upon your squads and companies for signs of failure, and ferret out those who are weak. Push them to the front so that they may die first, and let those ponies who know what it means to be free stand victorious at the end of the day!”

The crowd cheered at the unicorn’s words. Glaive simply stared out at the crowd. It wasn’t the loss of the siege weapons that bothered him so much as it was Iron Pick was running around with his body. It meant that he had either escaped or that the ponies of Bridleburg knew of the switch. Either way, there was no turning back. It was either victory now, or utter annihilation. With so many ponies at his disposal and with his network of conspirators in place, victory was all but assured. Daisy Lane would still open the gates, and the army of Bridleburg would lay waste to meager forces of Celestia’s Knights.

After that, the fighting would stop, just as Celestia had asked. There may have been a few fires to put out in the mean time, but Glaive was patient pony. The Griffin War would be settled by welcoming Phantasm to the capital, and killing him once he got there. He’d need a berserker, but there was sure to be a pony among his ranks that would take a demon seed. Maybe he’d create a dozen, and use them as hammers of destruction to enforce his will across Equestria. Regardless, once that war was over, Celestia would show herself again, and that’s when Glaive could truly claim the throne for his queen. He smiled, and looked back to the crowd.

“Soliders!” he said. “We stand united against the tyranny and oppression of the bureaucrats of Canterlot. But because of these ponies that hang behind me, Canterlot knows now that we are coming, and every hour we give them to prepare is another dozen lives lost. I know you are tired, and that you

yearn for rest, but we must march through the night. We will rest in the towns we come upon, and recruit their populations to our cause. Those who are not with us are against us, and will be used as fodder against those who stand against freedom. Gather your tents, brothers and sisters, we march on the hour!"

The army dispersed to gather their belongings as Glaive marched to his own tent. Crews of ponies were busy gathering his things while Apple Chase yelled orders. She smiled as Glaive walked into the tent.

"On the bright side," said Apple Chase, "If he's out here alone, that means that everypony else is dead." Glaive raised a suspicious eyebrow to the earth pony.

"Why would you think that?" asked Glaive. "It's equally possible that your brat niece is fully aware the situation, and let him out in the first place. It could have been any one of them." He looked out to the woods with a disgusted sigh. "There are a lot of ponies I regret not killing, but this one really takes the cake. Then again, if I had killed him, I'd be stuck in the decrepit body until I could find another one. Ah, well, such is life." He put an arm around Apple Chase and waved out at the forest. "I really hope once we're at peace that this damnable forest stops growing. I'd hate to have set fire to an entire region of Equestria."

"Peace is only a few days away, my dear," replied the mare. "Personally, I can't wait to be fitted for a crown. I'm thinking platinum."

Glaive only smiled at his princess. What waited ahead was the salvation of Equestria. In his hooves, the country would rise to new heights as they awaited the return of Nightmare Moon.

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Morning light broke upon the tundra of the Griffon Kingdom, and from the spire flew the griffins that returned ponies to the ground. Each and every pony wondered at how the world would see them after all those of enslavement under Phantasm. It was an entire population that had been lost in time; would they be able to survive in the turbulent times that awaited them in Hoofswell?

The griffins had made peace with ponies of Hoofswell, and vowed to return in the spring to help with the weather. Heart Chase had made the negotiations, and created a contract with Manus and Gladus to seal the deal. She had never had a non-pony friend before, and found that the griffins weren't as bad as the legends had made them out to be. Much like ponies, all they sought was a family to love, and a place to call their own. With the rookery restored, and families brought back together, they could be happy again, and they could help Hoofswell to be happy too.

Ridgeline had spent the night with his family, regaling them with story of the world as it was, and of his place in it. The listened for hours as he described the aftermath of the firebombing, and how years of memories were missing from his childhood. His mother didn't care that he barely remembered her; she only wanted to hold her child, and weep for his pain. They had begged him to come with them back to Hoofswell so they could be a family again, even if they had lost ten years of time.

"I can't," said Ridgeline. "Our goddess needs us, and much as I want to stay here with all of you, I have to do my part to keep every family safe. There's a war coming to Equestria, and it's up to us to stop it." Patches hugged her brother as the tears rolled down her face.

"I don't want you to go," she said. "You're my big brother, I don't want you to get hurt." Ridgeline hugged his sister back, and let her cry.

"I promise I'll come back," said Ridgeline. "There's nothing in Equestria that can keep me away."

Heart Chase watched the family reunion with a tear. It made her think of her own family, and how much she missed her sisters. If they lived through this, she vowed to make every moment with her family count, and to not take them for granted ever again. She remembered the stuffed rabbit in her satchel, and brought it to Patches. The filly looked at the stuffed bunny cautiously.

"Your big brother had this," she said. "He told me it remind him of you. You should keep it safe for him until he gets back." The filly took the toy and held it against her chest. She smiled at Heart Chase and ducked back behind her family.

The ponies made their way to the stone riser where Bard was busy carving the compass they needed to teleport away. With a wave of his horn, the stone powdered away in long lines and curves as his magic weaved around the stone. Muffins and her mother fluttered up to them.

“Muffins wanted to say goodbye to you before you left,” said the strawberry pegasus. The fuzzy filly fluttered up to Constance, and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Mommy said you should kiss the ponies you love,” said Muffins. “And I love you because you kept me safe even when things were really scary.” She fluttered to Ridgeline, and kissed his forehead. “And I love you too, because you saved Mommy from the griffin. When I grow up, I’m going to be as brave as you,” she said. “Maybe I won’t fight monsters like you do, but I’ll still be brave.” She hugged Bard, who tried to act annoyed but ultimately smiled. “And you’re a big meanie but you still came back for us. That makes you okay.” She came at last to Heart Chase. She wrapped her fuzzy little arms around the armored mare, and smiled.

“I hope you get to go home safe, Miss Heart Chase,” said Muffins. “Come back and visit sometime if you can.”

“We will,” said Heart Chase. “We all will.”

With that, the ponies took their places on the platform as Bard began to weave his spell. In his mind, he pictured the basement of a place he hadn’t been in seventeen years. He remember the musty smells, and the weeping walls of his childhood basement where he and his brother would play. Memories of happier times filled his head as the world tilted away, and in a flash of light, the four ponies disappeared.

Chapter 16

Brother Against Brother

As the caravan walked into the sun rise, Iron Pick stopped to doff his helm and really look at the city of Canterlot. Untouched by the Lunar Rebellion, it stood as a glorious monument to the arts and architecture of ponies from all over Equestria. From the Hoofswell marble spires, to the Bridleburg granite walls, the city seemed to sing with the harmony of a united Equestria.

Underneath the glamour and beauty of the city were the dark undercurrents of political dealings that had brought Iron Pick and indeed the entire civil war to its doorstep. Inside the city's walls were the ponies that decided that path of Equestria. Ponies who wanted to be Celestia, and rule the country in their vision. Iron Pick used to be one of those ponies; now he just wanted the fighting to stop.

Surrounding the outside gates of Canterlot were half a dozen Knight of Celestia, each armored in the crested bronze helms of the sun goddess. As the donkeys approached, they formed a barrier into the city. Iron Pick stepped forward, and bowed to the soldiers.

Upon seeing the distinctive armor of Glaive, the ponies immediately surrounded Iron Pick and called for reinforcements. Within seconds, a dozen more ponies of all races had arrived and stood threatening the donkeys with their bladed boots. Iron Pick only held up his hooves in surrender.

"I come bearing news of grave importance," said Iron Pick. "The army of Bridleburg marches toward Canterlot as we speak. As a sign of good faith, I have brought weapons stolen from Bridleburg in order to defend Canterlot. I will speak to General Cherry Snap about what I know, and I will speak only to him."

"General Cherry Snap is dead," spat one of the ponies. "And I know who you are; I'd recognize that armor anywhere. You're Glaive, the butcher of the Everfree Castle." A murmur ran through the guards ponies that sounded

a lot a suggestion to just kill him where he stood. He raised his hooves in surrender again.

“I am not who I appear to be,” said Iron Pick. “If you’ll just...”

A hoof to the back of the head sent Iron Pick to the ground in a heap. A massive grey earth pony slung the unconscious unicorn over his back, and marched off into the city with his prisoner. The remainder of the Knights secured the donkeys in irons, and marched them toward the city prison for questioning and processing. The few that were left lifted the tarps on the wagons to reveal pieces of siege engines, and ammunition.

“You think he was telling the truth?” asked one of the knights.

“Hell of a thing to lie about, don’t you think?” asked the other.

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The basement sighed with a rush of arctic air as the four ponies popped into being. Bard sparked his horn to shed light on the basement. He looked around a moment at the cobwebbed walls of the root cellar; they had grown thick with roots, and spiders as large as a hoof scurried away from the appearing ponies. Bard walked up the stone staircase to the rotten door

The house was nothing like he remembered it. Long gone were the fineries of the home that once he knew, only to be replaced with the incursion of the Everfree Forest. What little sun there was filtering through the trees shone through the shattered glass of the north windows. Covering the floors and stone furniture were a fine layer of moss that deadened every sound the ponies made as they came into the home. Bard looked around for a moment, and walked outside.

Around the home were the depths of the Everfree forest. Tree that had been saplings but a year ago stood full size, and dared anyone to try to encroach on their territory. Vines grew about the outside of the house, and roots pushed up the stone walk that lead to a small path through the forest. The sounds of the forest echoed around the ponies as they began to walk.

“I grew up here,” said Bard. “Just outside of a tiny town called Ponyville. We’ll be passing through it in about an hour, but there’s really nothing there

of interest. Unless you count my mother.”

“I thought your dad was a diplomat?” asked Constance. “Why didn’t you live in Everfree City?”

“Because this was halfway between Canterlot and the Everfree Castle,” said Bard. “Now it’s inside the Everfree forest, and soon to be reclaimed by the land.” He looked back to the home as a swath of shingles fell from the roof. “Going to have to find a new spot to teleport to.”

The ponies walked in silence for a half an hour till they came to the edge of the woods, and into the clearing above the village of Ponyville. Below them were the dozen or so houses that made up the town, including one that Bard said he needed to visit before going on to Canterlot. The ponies agreed, and they trotted into the town.

Ponyville was a simple village, really. Dirt roads, simple farms, a single inn that served as a general store for the ponies of the village were all that occupied the hamlet. The town had no claim to fame other than its annual Winter Wrap up event. That a pony from the outside world could be from here was surprise enough, but that ponies like Bard and Glaive came from such humble beginnings seemed impossible. The herd walked through the streets till they came at last to a tiny house along the road to Canterlot. Bard knocked, and let himself inside.

Curled napping in a rocking chair was a mare who’s sky blue coat and grey mane were distinctly familiar. To anyone looking at the two unicorns, it was obvious who the elderly mare was. Bard again knocked on the doorframe to awaken the mare. She sat up and blinked at the ponies.

“Huh? Who is...” she squinted a bit as her eyes came to focus. What she saw was a sky blue unicorn flanked by a pegasus and two Celestial Knights. She jumped to her feet as every loose object in the room levitated off the floor. “I knew this day would come! Equestria’s falling apart and all you have time for is harassing an old mare for being a cook?”

“Mom, no!” said Bard. “Put that stuff down. These are my friends. They’re not really Knights; they just borrowed the armor. Heart Chase, Constance, Ridgeline; this is Glittershine, my mother.” The elderly mare glared at Ridgeline and Heart Chase for a moment before setting the room back in

place.

“Friends, eh?” asked the Mare. “Well, come on in then. Have you dears had lunch yet?” With the stiffness of arthritis slowing her walk to just short of a shuffle, she walked into the kitchen to prepare carrots and tubers for the ponies.

“I’m afraid we can’t really stay,” said Bard. “I just wanted to stop by and say hello since I was in the area.”

“And what are you doing here?” asked the mare. “Picking up the act again? Your brother will be so happy to hear that. I think I still have your cape and hat in storage. Oh, it’ll be so wonderful to see you two together again performing for ponies the world over.” She beamed with delight as she filled plates with food. “And these ponies are part of your troupe?” She spotted Constance’s bandanna and distinctive earrings. “And a gypsy! Oh my stars and garters, I haven’t seen a gypsy in almost twenty years. I thought your kind was all but gone from Equestria.”

“No, ma’am,” said Constance. “We’ve taken to the seas and the tropics since the war, but we’re still around.”

Bard’s mother ushered the ponies into the kitchen against their will and heaped food in front of them. She peppered them with questions about how their travels were going, and what sort of act they were putting together. For the most part she ignored their insistence that they weren’t a troupe, and told them at length how wonderful it was that her sons were getting the show back together. She regaled the ponies with embarrassing stories of the brother’s misdeeds, and of Bard’s accident prone childhood. The unicorn stood there in angry silence as she talked for nearly an hour about how much the brothers loved each other, and how, even though they always roughoused, they still made a great act together.

Bard eventually excused himself from the table, and walked outside to his mother’s garden. When he didn’t come back after a few minutes, Constance followed him outside to find the unicorn pulling weeds with his teeth. Constance blinked a few times at seeing Bard do anything by hoof. She trotted up to him with a reassuring smile.

“It’s not that bad,” said Constance. “We’ve all got embarrassing parents.

Did I ever tell you the time..."

"It's not about that," snapped Bard. "She's just so blind sometimes. Every one of those funny stories, every tidbit about Glaive and I getting into trouble? Nine times out of ten Glaive was trying to kill me. He always got away with it because Dad was too busy trying to make ends meet, and Mom is just... well she's Mom. She doesn't want to see that her sons has become a murderer." He tore another weed from the garden. "You know she was with us in the early days of the Rebellion? She cooked for the troops. Not because she believed in Nightmare Moon's message, but because she wanted to make sure every pony to have a warm bed and a hot meal. I sent her home once the fighting started because I knew that the war was going to change us all. I didn't want that for her. She loves everyone, no matter what they believe, or who they are, or even what they've done." He grabbed at another weed and tore it from the ground. "I love my mom, but that she can just gloss over what's Glaive's done with his life..."

"That's what a mother's supposed to do," said Constance. "That's actually what all ponies are supposed to do. You said it yourself: we're herd creatures, we need each other to survive. It's kind of sad that our generation has lost sight of that and we revel in killing each other instead of being friends." Bard stopped pulling weeds and listened to what Constance was saying. "I don't know how this is going to end, and I know Heart Chase and Quill and Iron Pick all want to see Glaive dead for what he's done, but there's always a chance you can save him." Bard shook his head with a defeated sigh.

"I don't know," said Bard. "He and I traveled together for years, but I couldn't tell you what happened to change everything. We got along when we were kids, but he just started hating me after a while. Sure, we were a good act together, and so long as we stayed away from each other outside the shows, we were fine." He shook his head. "But when we learned of the Lunar Rebellion, he jumped at the chance to fight. He seemed so proud that he was going do something other than being a stage magician." Bard just sighed. "I just don't know. Maybe he had something to prove. Maybe he thought dad wasn't proud of us. Maybe my brother really is a lunatic. Whatever it is, I've got to stop him."

"You mean we've got to stop him," said Constance. "Didn't Muffins teach

you anything? We're friends, and friends stick together." She ruffled his mane with a wing. "Besides you still owe me money."

"I suppose you're right," said Bard as he looked into the sky. The sun was just past noon, and the chill of September was picking up in the winds. "We'd better get going if we want to make Canterlot by dusk. There's no telling how far away Glaive's army is, and that's about the last thing I want to run into on the road."

They left Glittershine's cottage after thanking the mare for the lunch and stories. With Canterlot in sight, the ponies cantered along the mountain roads that lead from Ponyville to the capital. They were about halfway there when they came upon another group of travelers headed to the capital. The ranks of that herd were made of two dozen mules and donkeys that had gathered up their farm tools, and donned whatever protection they could find in order to march to the capital. Bard slowed to a walk, and approached the mule leading the herd. His name was Cabrera.

"Where are you going with this herd?" asked Bard.

"There's an army approaching," said Cabrera. "I met a unicorn last night that told me about it. Come to think of it, he looked a lot like you, but he was wearing this dark armor. Looked like a Rebel if you ask me. He could have been your brother, actually."

"It probably was," said Bard. "Where was he headed?"

"Same place we are, but he had a dozen donkeys hauling carts," said Cabrera. "I gathered up who was willing to fight and assembled a militia. Ponyville's not going to be a target, so I figured we might as well aide the capital while it's still standing." Bard only nodded, and the ponies joined the herd of militia headed to the capital.

The city of Canterlot came into view as the herd rounded a mountain pass. The city had been built along the edge of a cliff of marble and stone from all over Equestria. The high city walls stood as a barrier to the world as the knights lining the parapets stared into the valley below. Behind the walls were the spires and towers of the city, all teeming with the life and commerce that made Canterlot the spectacle of unicorn engineering praised the world over. Further still at the edge of the cliff lay the palace

where Celestia had locked herself away from the world. The herd slowed to a halt as the city gate closed, and a rank of Knights approached the herd.

“What is the meaning of this?” asked the unicorn. “You there, Knights. Why are you traveling with this rabble?” Ridgeline and Heart Chase turned to look at each other. Was he talking to them? He was, and they both fumbled for answers a moment before Heart Chase took charge.

“These here irregulars have volunteered to fight against the invadin’ army coming in from the east,” said Heart Chase. “They’re from Ponyville and the surroundin’ areas, and they ain’t willin’ to let Canterlot to fall.”

“This is the second report of an army approaching from the east,” said the Knight. “I thought Bridleburg forces had stopped at Everfree City, but apparently they mean to take the capital.” He looked up at the troops, and spotted Bard among their ranks. He pointed a hoof at him. “Who is that unicorn?”

“His name is Bard,” said Heart Chase. “Used to be a magician, now he’s travelin’ with me. Why?” The knight looked again at Heart Chase, this time with a far more skeptical eye. After a moment, he looked at Ridgeline.

“Wait a minute, I know you,” said the Knight. “You’re that berserker. Who’d you kill to get that armor?”

“I didn’t kill anypony,” said Ridgeline. “I was loaned the armor by...”

“A likely story,” said the Knight. “Seize these ponies. Take the irregulars and integrate them with the militia and the donkeys that were taken into custody last night.” The knights moved in to surround the four ponies. “Put them with Glaive. We’ll have to bring in the Inquisitor.”

...

The army of Bridleburg rolled through the Everfree forest like a boulder down a hill, cutting through the dense forest in a massive swath fueled by fire and unicorn magic. Every pony was tired of marching, but as the sun began to set, they came at last to the edge of the forest. Glaive signaled a halt, and the troops happily came to a stop inside the woods.

As he looked out into the sloping plains of Ponyville, Glaive caught sight of Canterlot Castle in the atop the mountain in the distance, and smiled. Ahead lie the prize of a nation, just as Nightmare Moon promised all those years ago. Tonight they would rest. Tomorrow the city would fall beneath the hooves of the Lunar Rebellion.

Truthfully, he was looking forward to being done once and for all with the fighting. So many wars over the years had drained Equestria's spirit and ponies everywhere were at each other's throats for the most petty of things. With the rise of the Lunar Republic and a strong leader like Glaive, the fighting would end. With no more fighting. Celestia would return from her exile. Then would come the hard part. Glaive felt a shudder of terror roll down his spine as he thought about what awaited him.

Even if he was the most powerful mage in Equestria, taking on Celestia head to head would be dangerous, and there was no guarantee of success if she was prepared. What Glaive really needed was his body back. This old stallion's frame wasn't really up for such a draining task, and he was growing tired of waking up every morning in pain. He stared out of woods and into the city of Canterlot.

If he knew Iron Pick at all, he'd be there, though if he'd been dumb enough to go in like the diplomat he was, he was probably under arrest. Glaive had to chuckle. Even with all the aggravation of this old form, at least this body wasn't a wanted criminal. Not yet anyway. He almost didn't hear the pony coming up behind him.

"Sir," said the caramel coated earth pony. "I've received a message from Daisy Lane." Glaive floated the scroll to up to his face, and read it quickly. He smiled, and began to laugh. Just as expected, Iron Pick had gone in like a hero and tried to save Equestria. Glaive sighed with joy at the message, then turned to the earth pony.

"I am headed to Canterlot to change things up, if you know what I mean," said Glaive. "You have full control of the army, Caramel. If Stalliongrad forces are on time, they should be ready to converge with our troops at dusk tomorrow."

"Understood," said Carmel Snack. "What shall I ask to make sure it's you?" Glaive thought for a moment as he stared out at the hamlet of Ponyville

below. A glimpse of a small cottage caught his eye.

For a moment, it was twenty years ago. Two brothers stood atop this same hill staring into the valley below. They had stayed out late to watch the meteor shower, and catch flakes of the falling stars that fell upon them like snow. All seemed at peace for the brothers as they fell asleep together on the hillside. In the morning, Bard had awoken his brother, and together, hoof over shoulder, they watched the sun rise over the mountains. Mother had been angry at them for not coming home, but even after all the added chores, it had been worth it to see it all. It was right before Father had become a diplomat, and everything changed. It was the last time he remembered being happy with his family. He still carried with him those flakes of star metal that had fallen from the heavens. Glaive shook his head to drive out the memories.

“Sir?” asked Carmel Snack.

“Oh, right, the question,” said Glaive. “Ask me ‘Who is your mother?’”

“And the answer, sir?” asked Carmel Snack.

“Her name is Glittershine.”

...

The rough cut limestone walls glistened with moisture as the early morning sun poured in through the slits that could generously be called windows. The basement of city hall had been hollowed out into a dungeon of sorts to hold the criminal scum of Canterlot, but since ponies weren't given to criminal tendencies, the jail was empty save for its five recent guests. The ponies sat in two cells across from each other, the mares in one, the stallions in the other, and Iron Pick occupying his own cell. Heart Chase punched at the wall in frustration.

“This is a buncha horse apples!” she complained. “Here we are tryin’ to save Equestria, and they throw us in jail? Where’s the justice?”

“No good deed goes unpunished,” sighed Bard. “I wonder what their plan is here.” Iron Pick only groaned. Again, he'd suffered a beating at the hands of his captors, and again, he lay upon the floor of his cell. He had never

really thought about how terrible it was to be a wanted criminal, and he was glad that he'd lived his life on a fairly straight and narrow path. He rolled into the sunlight and tried to keep warm. Heart Chase continued her tirade about the Knights until the rattle of keys sent her into silence. The clapping of two sets of hooves came down the stairs at the far end of the hallway. Bard reached out with his magic to see who was coming. His mind touched the mare first. She was thinking about how old Glaive looked in that old body he had borrowed.

Bard nearly jumped out of his skin. He waved his horn and with a shimmer of sunlight, he and Heart Chase faded from view. Daisy Lane and Glaive, still in Iron Pick's body, walked past the cells. Glaive gave them a cursory glance but he saw only Constance and Ridgeline. He paid them no mind as he walked past them and to the cell of Iron Pick.

Heart Chase, don't move. It's Glaive. I've made us invisible, but it only works if you don't move. Just stay still, no matter what happens.

"You just couldn't stay where you were put?" asked Glaive. "This all would have been so much easier if you had just stayed home. Now I've got a whole bunch of your loose ends to clean up, in addition to all the other things I have to do to bring peace to Equestria." He nodded to Daisy Lane, who unlocked the cell door.

Glaive and Daisy Lane stepped inside the cell. With a wave of his horn, Glaive lifted Iron Pick from the floor, and pried open his eyes. They locked eyes for a moment as Glaive began muttering in what seemed like nonsense. Iron Pick felt himself slipping away, and suddenly he was looking at Glaive's body again. He blinked in surprise. Sure he was old again, but he was back in his body and that's what really mattered. A hoof to the back of the head sent him to the ground.

"Ugh..." groaned Glaive. "I thought I told you to keep this body in good shape."

"Sorry, sir," replied the earth pony. "I'm guessing some of the veterans got wind that you were down here and gave him a working over."

"No matter," said Glaive. "Bonesaw will fix me up as he always has. As for this piece of filth..." Glaive again lifted Iron Pick, and slammed him against

the wall. "I'm thinking I should kill him before he causes any more problems. Blame it on that massive stallion in the next cell. What do you think?" He turned to Daisy Lane who was staring into space. "I said what do you think?"

Without replying, she lashed out with a jerky but powerful swing that knocked the unicorn off his feet. A kick to the head later, and Glaive lay unconscious on the floor of the dungeon cell. Daisy Lane walked as if on puppet strings to the other cells and unlocked them.

"Ridgeline, I know you're loathe to hit a woman," she said to the copper coated stallion. "But if you'd make an exception for this one?" Ridgeline nodded and clobbered the mare with a right hoof that sent her to the ground. Bard stepped from his shroud of invisibility, and shook his head.

"Well that went better than planned," said Bard. He levitated her keys, and unlocked the mare's cell. Heart Chase pushed open the door, and shoved her way past everypony to see Iron Pick getting to his feet.

"Iron Pick?" she asked. The charcoal unicorn turned to look at his wife.

"I'm glad to be back in this body," he said. Glaive groaned on the floor as he tried to get up. Iron Pick wrapped him in a blanket of telekinesis, and slammed him against the wall. "As for this asshole..."

The clatter of a door slamming open broke Iron Pick's concentration long enough for Glaive to push away with his own magic. He dropped to the floor, and in a flash of white, he disappeared from the cell. Bard cursed loudly as the tromping of hooves filled the corridor. With no time for a plan, Bard reached out and puppeted Daisy Lane from the floor of the cell. She stepped into the hall to confront the four knights that had come barreling down the stairs.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Daisy Lane.

"We want Glaive," said a pegasus Knight. "Give us that bastard so we can string him from the city walls. I want his head mounted on a pike."

"You just missed him," said Daisy Lane as she rubbed the side of her head. "He clocked me and teleported out of here when I tried to question him. He

couldn't have gotten far. Sound the alarm and notify the guards. I want him found."

"Yes, Captain Lane," replied the knight. "You heard the mare, move out! Find that unicorn before he gets out of the city."

As the knights clattered back up the stairs, Bard stuck his head out to check on the situation. He spun Daisy Lane around, and marched the mare back to the cells the other ponies were hiding in. He let go of his magic, and she snapped into a fighting stance.

"What in the name of the moon was that?" she demanded. Heart Chase tackled the mare to the floor, and pinned her head to the ground with a hoof.

"You traitor!" snapped Heart Chase. "How could a Knight of all ponies work for some pony like Glaive?"

"Like you're so loyal," shot back Daisy Lane. "It's thanks to your army that the Lunar Republic will rise again. You two are far more guilty than I could ever be."

"Well that's one more for the gallows," said Iron Pick. "But we need her to get out of here. We're not going to be able to just walk past the guards without her." He looked to Bard. The unicorn nodded and took control of the mare again.

Daisy Lane lurched out of the cell as Bard took control of her again. The herd gathered their belongings, and marched up the stairs to find a knight staring intently at the wall. Rather than ask questions, they walked past the guard, and through the granite lined hallways of the city hall. Everywhere they looked there was evidence of erasures and reliefs that had been chiseled off the walls. It was a sad reminder of the events that plagued the memories of the ponies to this day. Putting the war behind them all would again put the world at peace, but for right now, there was an army to stop. The herd marched out of the city hall and into the alley beside it. They emerged from it a minute later, fully armored again, with a large sack slung over Ridgeline's back. Daisy Lane was nowhere to be seen; Bard shifted uncomfortably under the mare's armor.

“I feel like an idiot wearing this,” said Bard. “You sure you don’t want this get up, Constance?”

“It won’t fit my wings,” she said. “Besides, why do you even need that? With Iron Pick back in his body, he can stop his troops. Sure Glaive got away, but that’s it. We’re done; no more fighting.” The realization filled her face with a smile. “We did it. We stopped the war.”

Chapter 17

Parabellum

A hay wagon pulled by a massive orange stallion rolled from the city of Canterlot and into the mountain roads below. Adorning the flank of the stallion was the cutie mark of a sheaf of wheat. He was probably a farmer and the knights at the gate ignored him as if he were nothing. As he rounded the mountain along the path, the stallion's coat drained from orange to copper and the cutie mark of wheat was replaced by a pile of stones.

As he watched Ridgeline disappear from view, Bard slid back behind the doorframe he was hiding behind and shook his head. His ears were ringing and his hooves were tingling, both of which told him to cool it with the magic for a while. He took a deep breath and turned to the mares.

"Alright," he said. "Iron Pick and Ridgeline should make it back to wherever the army is by mid afternoon. If I know Glaive, he ordered them to attack at dusk. That gives us a few hours to find him, and stop him from getting out of the city."

"How'd he teleport like that?" asked Constance. "I've never seen a pony that could just pop from one place to another."

"He probably didn't," said Bard. "Unless he's learned a new spell or two, then he probably just combined the spells that make him invisible and intangible. Those were two of his big tricks on the stage, and they're easy to pull off." He looked out to the streets as if searching the crowds for a familiar face. "Where would I go if I were my brother?"

"What's he gonna do?" asked Heart Chase. "Ridgeline's not gonna let Glaive get near Iron Pick again. The war's over; we can all go home now. Heck, as soon as the troops start headin' back, we might even see Celestia again." He face lit up with joy. "We might get to see Celestia again! Come on, y'all; let's head down to the palace."

Heart Chase trotted away from the building where they were hiding in and

through the streets of Canterlot toward the majestic castle. The spires of the summer castle rose into the air like great flowers that had lost their petals, each one dedicated to one purpose or another. Atop the domed roofs were a myriad of weather vanes that signaled to inbound pegasi local wind conditions. Below the domes were the spiraling white towers of the castle; each one had been bricked up by Celestia to seal off the outside world.

As the herd approached the Palace gates, the low hum of hundreds of ponies chanting filled the air. It sounded as if a giant cloud of bees had descended upon the courtyard, and sought to drain the gardens of nectar with their numbers. Instead, hundreds of ponies draped in sack cloth bowed in front of the castle walls and chanted. Each one chanted their own prayer in a low and quiet hum, but the combined voice of the ponies turned the bare walls of the palace into an echo chamber of humming. Heart Chase cringed as sounds gathered around her. It was worse than getting your head caught in a hive of bees. At the front of the rows, there was a pegasus who walked among the ponies with a basket of apples. He greeted the ponies with a bow.

“Have you come to worship?” he asked. “Please, find yourself a spot, and give praise to our goddess Celestia that she might return to grace us with her presence once more.” Constance raised an eyebrow at the white pegasus and shook her head.

“You know this isn’t what she wants, right?” asked Constance. The pegasus chuckled, and passed Constance an apple.

“My dear young lady, you’ve forgotten the last words our goddess spoke to us,” said the pegasus. “‘I don’t know if I love you anymore’ is what she told us. Ponies had lost their faith in their goddess, and for that, she stopped loving us. We are all here to prove that we believe in her, and that we love her. What better way to show love than absolute devotion?”

“It’s kind of stupid,” said Bard. A few heads turned to look at him before returning to their worship. “I mean, look at the Kin of Luna. They’re out there searching for a way to bring Luna back from Nightmare Moon, not baying at the sky trying to bring her back.” The white pegasus narrowed his eyes at the Unicorn.

"I will thank you not to mention the traitor in the presence of the true goddess," he growled. "I think you should leave before some pony does something you'll regret."

"Don't you mean..."

"I did not misspeak," said the pegasus.

"Well, we're not leavin'," said Heart Chase. "We came here to see Celestia return, cause what yah know is wrong. Celestia's last instructions to ponies was 'I just want the fightin' to end.' Worshipin' at her doorstep like a reed blowin' in the wind ain't gonna do nothin' to bring her back."

The pegasus threw down his basket of apples, and started screeching at the ponies. He flared out his wings and reared back. The pegasus lashed at them, driving them back from the garden and into the street. He slammed the iron gate in their faces, and snorted with the fury of burning hatred.

"Do not presume to know what the goddess wants!" shrieked the pegasus. "We are the true believers, and neigh-sayers like you are the reason Equestria has been forsaken!" He walked away with a huff, leaving the ponies staring in amazement at the lunatic pegasus.

"That's the second high strung pegasus preacher I've ever met," said Heart Chase. "Gotta be somethin' in the clouds that makes ya'll nuttier than a bag of squirrels." Constance blinked in amazement at the analogy, and was rendered speechless by the sheer absurdity of it.

They walked away from the palace in quiet reflection. It would probably be another few hours before Iron Pick made it back to troops, and probably another hour of speaking before he convinced them to abandon their plans of conquest. Heart Chase had faith that the ponies of Bridleburg would see reason and that they would understand Celestia's final instructions.

...

Glaive stepped out from the wall of the prison with a growl. He should have seen it sooner, but he didn't. Why he'd been there or where his brother had been hiding, he didn't know. What was worse, he had Daisy Lane, and

could easily extract all the details of her part in the plot. He cursed to himself as he opened the locker containing his armor. He hastily donned the blue scales, then went immaterial as he walked through the walls of the prison. With Iron Pick out in the world, he would probably send the troops back to Bridleburg. His revolution had failed. Or had it?

There was still the army of Stalliongrad approaching from the west, and there were more than enough of them to take on the meager contingent of knights that guarded Canterlot. Certainly there would be concessions, but after a few quick take-overs, and he'd be back atop the pile and first in line for Celestia's return. Celestia had to come back for the plan to work. It would work. It would all work.

Glaive emerged on the streets of Canterlot after walking upward through the dirt. He let reality come to him again as he made for the western city walls. There was no use pretending to play nice now. He had to make contact with General Ferns and lead the army to victory. Once he had taken Canterlot, the war could end, and Celestia would return. It was too bad about Apple Chase; she'd probably be taken away in irons along with the rest of the top brass. Glaive put it out of his mind. Such was the price of failure.

A half a dozen miles away, Ridgeline and Iron Pick strode into the center of the Bridleburg encampment with struggling sack over Ridgeline's back. They had switched armors, and now Iron Pick wore the bronze armor of the Celestian Knights. It was symbolic, mostly, but if things got ugly, he really wanted Ridgeline to be better protected. He called for the troops to surround him. General Caramel Snack and Apple Chase pushed through the throngs of ponies to get close to the two, but Iron Pick began speaking before they could make their way to him.

"Fillies and Gentlecolts," boomed Iron Pick. "The pony that was leading your charge with fiery rhetoric and chants of loyalty was not the pony you see before you now. My name is Iron Pick, and I am here to tell you that you have all been duped." Caramel Snack and Apple Chase pushed through to Iron pick as a murmur ran through the ranks. He truth to the earth ponies as they emerged from the crowd.

"Under the authority of the Celestian Knights, I arrest you and all your officers for treason against Equestria," said Iron Pick. "Troops, seize your

officers and place them in irons. There will be no war today, only punishment for those who have led the faithful astray.”

The officers struggled against the troops as they were brought down and placed in irons but for the most part, they went down without a fight. Surrounded and outnumbered, the officers were drug to center of the troops and placed before Iron Pick. Each of the officers was escorted by at least one nervous pony, with two holding down Caramel Snack.

“You bastard!” snarled Caramel Snack. “How dare you thwart the plans of Nightmare Moon? She will have your soul for this!”

“I trusted you Caramel Snack,” said Iron Pick. “I trusted you to keep these ponies home to defend against the crown should they choose to contest our secession. In throwing your lot in with the Lunar Rebels, you have failed not only me, but every single pony that has died on the way to Canterlot. You have thrown away their lives and their time in a bid for power orchestrated by a mad pony. I thought better of you, and I was wrong.” He looked to the nervous earth ponies that held Caramel Snack to the ground. “What are you names, soldiers?”

“I’m corporal Butter Bean,” said the tan stallion.

“Private Blossom Stitch,” replied the red mare.

“You two are my new generals,” said Iron Pick. “To all of you who who have arrested an officer, take the ranks of those you have seized.” The ponies stripped the officers of their distinctive helms, and replaced their own with the ones they had take.

“As for the rest of you,” said Iron Pick, “go back to Bridleburg and tend to your families. You are guilty only of following rhetoric and of losing faith in the princess. I know it’s hard to keep the faith while she’s away, but with the end of war in Equestria, she will return to us, I promise.”

“You’re just as much a traitor as the rest of us, Iron Pick,” spat Apple Chase. She struggled against the two mares that held her down. “Are you going to arrest yourself, you hypocrite?” Iron pick nodded to Ridgeline, who dumped the sack to the ground. Daisy Lane, still bound in rope wriggled free of the sack.

“If I might have another volunteer for Captain Daisy?” asked Iron Pick. Two mares stepped up to take her ropes. “My troops, the ponies you see bound before you are traitors to the crown, and traitors to Equestria. Look upon their faces and remember their disloyalty. The seeds of dissention have been sown deep and like a weed, we must pull it from the root if we are to eradicate it. Ridgeline, if you would please.” The copper coated stallion nodded. He walked to the cart, and produced irons that clattered shut around Iron Pick’s neck.

“For treason against the crown, and in the name of Celestia’s Knights, I arrest you,” said Ridgeline. “You and your officers will be tried in the court at Canterlot and if found guilty, you will be executed by hanging. Thus is the price of treason. May our goddess have mercy on your souls.” Ridgeline turned to the newly commissioned officers who sat with stunned looks upon their faces. “Bind the prisoners together, and grant me a squadron of you finest to take them to Canterlot. Then do as you have been ordered, and go home. Hail Celestia.”

The ponies stared in disbelief as Ridgeline loaded Iron Pick into the cart, and ushered the rest of the former officers in as well. A squadron of armored ponies took up positions around the cart as Ridgeline hitched himself to it and without a word, Ridgeline began the slow march to Canterlot. Amid the protests of the officers, Iron Pick stood silent at the head of the cart as he accepted his fate.

A dozen miles away, the three ponies aimlessly wandered the city of Canterlot. They had no money, so they couldn’t get a hotel, and they couldn’t really leave without attracting the attention of the Knights. They had seen the statute gardens, and were impressed by the realistic sculptures of fantastic creatures that they never knew existed, and from there, they simply walked around the various parks and gardens that were open to the public. Without a plan and with no sign of Glaive, the ponies sat near the entrance and waited for Ridgeline and Iron Pick to return.

It was nearing dusk when they did return. Ridgeline was hauling a hay wagon full of bound ponies, and surrounding that wagon were a dozen troops clad in the steel armor of Bridleburg. Ridgeline stopped at the gate as the rank of knights approached.

“Didn’t I arrest you earlier?” asked the Knight.

“Yes,” said Ridgeline. “But since you didn’t listen before, I left to take care the invading army myself.” He looked back to Iron Pick. “Well, I had some help.” Iron Pick stepped down from the cart, his manacles clanking around his fetlocks as he stepped.

“My name is Iron Pick, commander of the army of Bridleburg,” he said. “The ponies bound behind me are my officers. In the past week, I have learned the error of my ways, and I seek to mend the pain that I have caused Equestria. I request a speedy trial for my crimes, and the crimes of my officers. The troops who have escorted us here are guilty of no crime but following orders, and I request that they be free to return to their homes.”

The knight blinked in amazement. Was this some kind of joke? Iron Pick was a respected business pony from Bridleburg, not the leader of an army of ponies that sought to destroy Equestria. Was what he said true? Were these ponies conspirators against the crown? The knight shook his head in disbelief.

“Alright then,” he said at last. “Then we’ll get you before the magistrate in the next hour. You’re all under arrest, then, I guess. You, earth pony; carry them to the holding cells. I’m sure you know the way.”

True to his word, the herd of officers were brought before a judge within the hour, and a jury was selected from ponies on the street outside the courthouse. With a bang of his gavel, the unicorn presiding over the hearing asked for a plea to which he received two dozen haggard and miserable replies of not guilty. A lawyer that had been assigned to the officers entered twenty four please of not guilty, and one plea of guilty for Iron Pick. He waited in silence for trial to actually begin, knowing that he was the only witness to the treasonous actions of these ponies.

For an hour, Iron Pick told the tale of his plan. He spoke about he funneled money and resources from the mines into financing the raising of an army, and how he had planned to unite the families of Bridleburg into supporting his bid for the crown. He named his wife as a coconspirator from the beginning, and made particular mention of Apple Chase’s involvement. Heart Chase was conspicuously omitted from being mentioned.

Iron Pick spoke at length about Glaive's involvement with the entire ordeal, and how he had taken his plan of secession and turned it into revolution instead. He named the officers and their roles in the conspiracy, and then brought to light the depth of all of their treason. At last, as he came to the final day of the plan, he apologized to the ponies of Equestria for having brought such misery upon the lands.

The officers only glared at Iron Pick. He had given up everything, and asked not even leniency in return. With the entire conspiracy of Bridleburg laid before him, the judge turned to the officers and asked if any of them wished to take the stand. The ponies nearly stampeded to the witness stand, biting and pushing their way to the box.

For hours more, the ponies either denied their involvement in the plan, or downplayed their role in it. Each spoke of how they were the true victim, and how they had been just following orders from Iron Pick. They painted the charcoal unicorn as a heartless monster that ruled with an iron hoof, and slaughtered any pony who stood in his way. Every pony told a similar tale, though the details rarely overlapped, and at the end of it, Iron Pick stood accused of every crime under Celestia's sun. The judge ordered Iron Pick to be brought forward to face him.

"You have pleaded guilty to treason, Iron Pick," said the Judge. "These ponies behind you have labeled you a monster and murderer among other things. They would have me believe you have unfairly rounded up your friends to bring them down with you. However, given the defeat of Celestia's Knights a few days ago in the Everfree forest, and the eyewitness accounts that put not only you, but also your coconspirators there, I then put the question to jury."

The judge nodded to the ponies in the jury box that had spent the past few hours listening to the tales of both Iron Pick and the officers. As the bailiffs ushered the officers into the holding cells below the jury shuffled from the box and into a back room to deliberate,. Iron Pick stared out at the setting sun, where he thought he saw pegasi flying for the city of Canterlot. The sky was otherwise clear, and rain wasn't scheduled for anytime soon. Why were there so many...

The first wing of pegasi released their deadly cargo over the walls of the city. Of course their first target had been the air cavalry barracks. The spire

lit up lit a torch in the night, and filled the city with the hideous orange glow of hellish fire and chaos. Iron Pick stared out into the city in a panic. Had the troops disobeyed him? Were they attacking instead of going home?

It wasn't until the window exploded in a shower of glass that he realized what was going on. Of course Glaive would have a backup plan. It wasn't enough to use the superior numbers of Bridleburg to take the city; he would have brought every pony he could to fight. Ponies that Iron Pick himself had made deals with, and supported in their bid for independence.

The army of Stalliongrad was marching on Canterlot, and there was nothing any pony could do about it.

Chapter 18

The Battle for Canterlot

Butter Bean and Blossom Stitch stood in a meeting with the herd of newly officers discussing the hows and whys of their return. The force march from the previous day had left the army exhausted, and they decided to leave the next morning rather than immediately. True, that wasn't exactly as Iron Pick had ordered, but it was now the duty of these two ponies to see that every soldier was taken care of. Iron Pick had been right; they had gotten caught up in the rhetoric. Instead of being a credit to Bridleburg, they were almost the downfall of Equestria.

"Everypony? Can I have your attention please?" asked General Butter Bean. His officers settled down and turned to face the earth ponies. "Thank you. Um... Cloud Drop was it? Weather report?"

"The pegasus squadron is reporting unusual activity in the upper atmosphere with winds in excess of a hundred and fifty miles an hour blowing directly south," said the purple pegasus. "Reports are that they've been going on for at least the past ten hours, and that something up north is causing the disturbance. It shouldn't be a problem, but there is a massive, unpredicted cloud bank about ten miles off that's moving with the system. Doesn't look like it's carrying rain though, so no pony knows what's to make of it. We should be fine to move out tomorrow morning." Butter Bean nodded to the pegasus, and turned to one of the unicorns.

"Minty Rest was it?" asked Butter Bean. "How's the troops morale?"

"Well sir," said the magenta earth pony. "They're all sort of melancholy. Here they had been psyching themselves up for the good fight, only to find out that they were being manipulated all along. A lot of the ponies are feeling ashamed for buying into the rhetoric. Some have even offered to surrender themselves for treason as our former officers did."

"And your suggestions?" asked Blossom Stitch.

"Well..." said the mare. "Ah... perhaps some morale building activities?"

Maybe have them do some physical work to take their minds off the whole situation?"

"How about building?" asked another earth pony. "We could build a road from Bridleburg to Canterlot, and say it was community service."

The ponies began murmuring in agreement. It seemed like a worthwhile pursuit, and it would keep the minds of the ponies off the thoughts of war. If it wasn't for the echoes of explosions coming from the miles off that wouldn't have given Canterlot a second thought. The army moved to the edge of the Everfree forest to stare in horror as the city of Canterlot burned in the distance. Butter Bean and Blossom Stitch looked to each other, then back to their troops.

"Saddle up!" yelled Blossom Stitch. "Cloud Drop, take your pegasi and give Canterlot air support. Minty Rest, ready the troops to move out immediately. Officers, take charge of your platoons! Our princess is under attack! We ride to defend Canterlot!"

A few miles away, Heart Chase, Bard, and Constance had taken shelter from the incoming aerial attack underneath a slab of granite that had been blasted off the side of a building in the first strike. Constance was in a near panic from the claustrophobic conditions, but Heart Chase stoked her mane to keep the pegasus calm. Bard watched as the city burned around them in unrelenting horror.

"What the hell happened?" he asked. "I thought we won. That was the plan. Iron Pick calls off his troops, we expose Glaive, and we're done. We ended the wars, damnit! It's not supposed to be like this!"

"Could it be the Lunar Rebels?" asked Heart Chase.

"There's not this many of them," said Bard. "There's not this many pegasi anywhere in Equestria except..." They both looked to Constance. "Son of a nag, I should have known it. Glaive doesn't do anything half assed; that's the army of Stalliongrad outside of those walls."

The herd cringed as rocks began to rain upon their position, smashing into the slab of granite above, and shattering the cobblestone walks outside. From where they hid, they watched as the city hall burned, and as ponies

evacuated the building only to be met with the horrors of raining boulders and flaming debris. Even during the Lunar Rebellion things hadn't been this bad. Normally pegasi dueled in the air, and provided recon to the troops on the ground. What was happening here was malice, pure and simple. This wasn't a bid for independence; it was a grudge match, and Canterlot was losing.

Heart Chase stared out into the city as it burned around her. Where was Canterlot's pegasi? How could the capital city be unprepared for something like this? Had they been taken out in the first wave? Did they just never expect something like this to happen? The questions took a back seat to her comforting of Constance. They were pretty much safe for now, and worrying about what they couldn't control would do none of them any good.

Across the street, Iron Pick stood from the pile of tables that had buried him in the first wave of bombings. His ears were ringing, and his head swam. It took him a moment to regain his bearings, but he realized the building was on fire, and that he should probably just get out. Ridgeline bucked through the remainder of the debris to join him.

"You're still under arrest you know," said Ridgeline. Iron Pick only chuckled at the absurdity of it all. With a wave of his horn, he blasted a hole in the wall beneath the window and stepped through. Outside, it was as bad as he had feared.

All around the city of Canterlot burned, fueled by the alchemical concoctions of the Stalliongrad Army. Ponies lie injured or killed in the streets, and entire buildings had been reduced to little more than leaning piles of rubble. For the moment, there were no more pegasi dropping things into the city, but that wasn't going to last. As the catastrophe of war swelled around him, he looked out into the city and wondered what he could do to help. There was nothing to do but wait. The army of Stalliongrad would batter down the gates of Canterlot to take the city and with it, Equestria. Since time immemorial, Equestria had prospered under the guiding hooves of the princesses. Iron Pick had managed to bring it all crashing down within a year.

"Iron Pick! Ridgeline!" yelled Heart Chase. "Get over here!" The bewildered unicorn and the banged up earth stallion trotted to the downed granite slab and ducked into the basement the ponies had taken shelter in. Heart Chase

greeted them with a hug. "So much for that trial."

"I expected to be hanging by now," said Iron Pick. "Every minute past this one is a gift from Celestia herself. I should probably use them wisely." Another boulder clattered into the streets in front of them. "Though I'll admit, what to do now is a bit of a mystery."

"Well, we can't leave the city," said Bard. "And you can't win a war through air power alone. They're going to have to take the city by force. I suppose we could just hide here until it's all over."

"What a cowardly thing to say," said Iron Pick.

"Well, I am a coward," admitted Bard. "My friends are safe here, and that's all I care about now."

He looked to the motley herd that sat sheltered beneath the granite slab. Here they were safe, and that's all that mattered. Soon enough the forces of Stalliongrad would come charging through the city and Canterlot would fall beneath their hooves. Bard was sure he could smooth talk and puppeteer their way to freedom. Where they would go next really didn't matter. These ponies had become trusted friends in such a short time that it amazed Bard; he was willing to put his own fear aside for their safety. Bard began scratching a circle into the floor.

"What are doing?" asked Constance.

"I'm getting us out of here," said Bard. "I think I've got enough magic left in me to take us somewhere other than here. I want to keep you all safe."

"We can't just abandon Canterlot!" said Ridgeline. "If we abandon the city, then Glaive's won and everything we've done has been for nothing."

"I don't care," said Bard. "I don't care about my brother or about Equestria or any of that nonsense. I care about you ponies. You, Ridgeline, Constance; you're all my friends and if I can keep you safe, then by Luna I will do everything I can to make sure that you are."

"What about my family?" asked Heart Chase. Bard stopped drawing for a moment, and looked up at Heart Chase. "What about Red Chase, and Quill

Pick, and all the fillies that were born this year? What about Bridleburg? Do yah think Glaive is going to let Bridleburg go unpunished for what's happened? Iron's already an admitted traitor; it would take nothin' to convince the armies of the Lunar Republic to march to war again. If yer brother seizes power, then Bridleburg will be razed. We've all know what kind of pony he is, Bard, and yah know I'm right."

Bard looked down to his circle a moment. With a few more scratches into the stone, it would be ready to take these ponies to wherever would be safe. Heart Chase was right though; Glaive would seek retribution. He didn't know Heart Chase's family, but if they were anything like her, then they were worth saving. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Okay then," said Bard. "What do we do?" Heart Chase looked out to the city. She saw other ponies cowering in fear beneath rubble or caring for those injured in the bombing. She walked from the shelter of the basement and into the streets of Canterlot.

"Come on," she said. "It's time to show Celestia what we're really made of."

The aerial assault abated as the army of Stalliongrad marched to the gates of the Canterlot. Behind the gates stood the remains of the Knights, two hundred strong against an army of two thousand or more. Steadfast, they waited for the breach, exchanging looks of resignation, rather than determination. Ridgeline trotted to the front line of the army to find the same guard that had repeatedly hassled him at the gate.

"What are you doing here?" asked the Knight. "Shouldn't you be hiding with the rest of the civilians?"

"I'm not a civilian," said Ridgeline. "I may not be a knight, but I am a soldier, and I adhere to the Code. We will not let Canterlot fall."

"Who's we?" asked the knight. Ridgeline nodded behind him.

Behind the rows of Knights stood nearly two hundred more citizens of Canterlot from all walks of life. Bureaucrats stood shoulder to shoulder with merchants and farmers. Unicorns stood proud next to mules and donkeys. In the front lines stood Bard, Constance, Iron Pick, and leading the herd was Heart Chase. She trotted to the knight commander and bowed.

“Canterlot Irregulars reporting for duty sir.”

“These are civilians!” said the knight. “They can’t fight.”

“Why not?” asked Heart Chase. “Isn’t this their city too? Yah ain’t gotta be some hardened veteran to know the difference between right and wrong, and what’s happenin’ to Canterlot is just wrong. All this started cause a couple ponies lost faith in the their princess, and thought they could do a better job than their goddess. We’re all guilty of losin’ our faith sometimes, but these ponies right here believe in Celestia, and they believe in Equestria. What’s outside those gates is what happens when ponies lose sight of what makes us ponies to start with.”

As the harvest moon loomed in the sky, the mare in the moon seemed to have a cruel smile for everypony in Equestria. The gate began to splinter under the crashing of the ram and the walls reverberated with the cries of two thousand screaming ponies. Heart Chase stood tall as a massive cloud bank rolled across the sky and into the city.

“What makes us ponies is that we’re willin’ to believe in each other, and that we’re willin’ to work together to overcome anything. Ponies need other ponies to live, and it took a war for me to learn that.” She pointed a hoof to the splintering gate. “Canterlot can’t fall to the Nightmare in us all. I won’t allow it, and neither should you. All of us may just be ordinary ponies, but we’re willin’ to defend Canterlot to our last breath. Not because we’re heroes, but because we believe in Equestria. Celestia’s final message to ponies was that she’d return when the fightin’ stopped. Well guess what ponies?” She lowered her helm and turned to face the shattering gate. “The fightin’ ends here and now. We will be the ponies Celestia wants us to be.”

The gate exploded in splinters of wood and steel as the battering rams began to plough through the final planks. The Knights stood ready to charge at the army coming through the gates, as the citizens of Canterlot stood ready to stop anypony from making their way into the city. This was it. In a moment, the gates of Canterlot would fall, and the war would come barreling through it. Heart Chase offered a prayer to Celestia.

If I die here, she prayed, let it be penance for the horrors I caused, and let this war end here.

“For Equestria and Princess Celestia!” cheered a voice from the cloud bank. Heart Chase looked up to see a swarm of pegasi and griffins rolling over the edge of the cloud bank to take back the skies from the Stalliongrad pegasi. A griffin landed in front of Constance.

“I heard about your war,” said Manus. “And your friend Star Heart said he could get us here in day. A thousand miles in a day! Who would have guessed?”

Bard looked up to see Star Heart at the head of the cloud, horn sparkling as the ponies atop the cloud disembarked to the ground. Constance smiled at the griffin. She was glad to have the support. Manus turned to the gate with a nod, and lowered his head for battle.

The gate finally gave way just as the last of the ponies from Hoofswell made ground. The knights charged horn first into the army of Stalliongrad with a cry of Celestia on their lips and the dreams of Equestria in the hearts. As the two sides clashed, the citizen ponies joined with the Hoofswell ponies to form a deep column that would hold back the advancing army. They were still outnumbered, but they stood united as Equestrians against the armies of Stalliongrad.

For twenty minutes, the knights fought the army of Stalliongrad to a standstill, nearly blocking the front gates with the bodies of the fallen. The Stalliongrad pegasi tried to outflank the citizens but were thwarted by the air support of hundreds of griffins. Pegasi began to fall on the city with broken wings; the citizen ponies moved in to restrain them and treat their wounds.

The Knights had managed to hold their own long enough to think they had a chance when the Knight line suddenly broke. The knight commander felt himself go limp as if some pony had cut his strings, and the army of Stalliongrad poured through the breach around him. Hundreds of armored ponies barreled through the front lines of the knights and crashed like a wave against the citizens of Equestria. The unicorns of the city blasted away as many soldiers as they could, but were soon overwhelmed by the sheer numbers. The citizens began to fall back into the city when the trump of a horn came from the road behind the Stalliongrad army.

Leading the charge up the mountain road were Butter Bean and Blossom Stitch in full gallop. The thundering herd of the army of Bridleburg slammed into the flank of the Stalliongrad army, and began carving through it with the zeal of the righteous. Emboldened by the unexpected support, the citizens of Equestria began to push back the tide of soldiers that threatened their city. The lines of the Knights reformed as the citizens advanced, and the army of Stalliongrad's invincible charge slowed to a halt. Heart Chase felt a chill; she swore she felt a ghost walk right through her.

For another hour, the battle raged on both fronts as the ponies of Stalliongrad were cut down by the army of Bridleburg on their flank and the Knights of Celestia at their head. The citizens dragged downed ponies from the fight to bind them and start treating their wounds. Behind the columns of citizens, a growing number of ponies retreated from the fight to treat the injured, and the streets became a hospital only yards away from the fighting. The citizens of Canterlot didn't want to kill the ponies of Stalliongrad, they just wanted them to stop fighting.

Finally caught between the hammer of the army of Bridleburg and the anvil of the citizens of Equestria, the army of Stalliongrad began to surrender after an agonizing hour of fighting. Officers tore off their helmets and bowed in defeat to the remaining Knights.

It was hours before the officers of Stalliongrad were taken into custody, and some of them had surely gotten away, but with the citizens of Canterlot acting like brothers to their so called enemies, the cycle of violence had been broken in Equestria. Citizens began to treat their wounded and soldiers offered no resistance as the ponies of Canterlot tried to help everyone that had been injured. Whether they had been the invading force or simply a pony that had stood up to fight for their city, every pony helped tend to the wounded, and move the dead from the streets to the fields. Everypony realized that the bloodshed had to stop, and that in order for Equestria to be strong again, they had to work together as nature intended. They had to be the ponies that Celestia had wanted them to be so she would come back to lead them once more.

The city itself was in shambles, having been blasted to pieces by the aerial bombardment of Stalliongrad's pegasi. Fire still burned in the city for hours as the griffins and Hoofswell pegasi moved in clouds from far off to bring the rain. Debris littered the streets as the ponies tried to make sense of

what they'd become.

For the most part ponies stared blankly into the devastation that war brought to their doorstep. Some prayed in silence, while others wandered around aimlessly trying to find something to hold on to. Others had started to take charge to search for survivors among the ruins of Canterlot as they waited for the rains.

Heart Chase walked among the ranks of the injured soldiers and citizens searching for her friends. She eventually found them among the wreckage of the battle site, standing around a fire made from broken spears. Bard was missing part of his ear. Constance was miraculously untouched by the fighting. Iron Pick was nowhere to be found, and Heart Chase had taken hoof to jaw, but it was Ridgeline who had suffered the worst.

Ridgeline had taken a blade to the face, and now sported a roguish patch where once he had an eye. One of the unicorn medics had sealed the wound across his face, but he was left with a scar that now ran down his face as a sad reminder of the horror that he fought to dispel. Heart Chase wondered silently if he had lost control during the battle.

"I know what you're thinking," said Ridgeline. "And no, I didn't lose control. I wanted too. I could have killed a hundred ponies before anyone stopped me, but I found something to hold onto that the demon can't break." He smiled at his friends. "It's you three. You've taught me that friendship is all we need to keep going. I may have lost an eye, but I gained everything in return." He looked out the destroyed city with a smile. "I think everypony here learned that lesson as well."

"It's too bad so many had to die to learn that lesson," said Constance. Her ears perked up as the sound of humming drifted upon the wind. "Do you hear that?" she asked. "It's coming from the palace. Come on; let's go see what's going on."

The ponies cantered through the destroyed city streets of Canterlot. It would take years before everything was repaired, and the scars that it would leave on the hearts and minds of the ponies would last for generations. Still, everypony seemed to realize how far they had fallen from grace, and how much of a struggle it would be to return to the favor of their goddess. Through the blasted homes, and shattered sidewalks, the lesson

in humility had not fallen upon deaf ears.

They came to the gardens of the palace after a short walk to find that all of the ponies that had prostrated themselves before its walls had fled once the bombing began. As for the palace, it still shone as if made of diamonds. The battle had not touched upon the beauty of Celestia's home. More importantly, where there had been only a stone wall, there was now a front door. Heart Chase looked to her friends for reassurance that what she was seeing was real. They too stared in disbelief and found themselves walking toward the door. Heart Chase pushed it open, and the ponies stepped inside.

Chapter 19

The Journey Home

The inside of the palace was more beautiful than any of the ponies could have imagined.

Seemingly untouched by time, the high white walls of solid marble met at the ceiling in grand arches that housed stained glass renditions of important events in the history of Equestria. The windows were filled with the tales of legends of ponies past who had done great things for Equestria, and of those who had given everything in sacrifice to their princesses. Reminders of the dual monarchy were still everywhere here, and depictions of Luna equaled the number depictions of Celestia. The windows told the storied history of Equestria in glass that shimmered in the light of the rising sun. The ponies passed the windows, and ascended the marble stair case toward the throne room.

As a monument to the goddesses, the throne room was a housed two massive stained glass windows. A depiction of Luna raising the moon graced the western window and was mirrored on the east wall by a depiction of Celestia raising the sun. Along the edges were marble columns to support the painted ceiling, and in the center of the room ran a carpet of burgundy that led to a rider. Atop the riser there were two thrones. In one, there was a goddess.

With wings that shimmered like silver, and a horn magnificent as any Equestria had ever seen, the goddess rose from her throne, and descended the stairs. Her pink mane flowed behind her as if blown by a gentle breeze. The ponies stopped in place, and bowed to their princess. The ponies saw that Celestia's violet eyes had been stained by tears, as if she had seen the horrors of war that lay outside. She waved her horn, and the door sealed behind the ponies.

"I have you to thank," said Celestia with a far off whisper. Her voice was filled with sadness, and her eyes had again filled with tears. "You did it. You ended the wars, which is exactly what I asked of my ponies. I just wanted the fighting to stop, and you did just that." She looked down at the ponies

as she started to cry again. "I only wish you could have done it without killing so many of my children." Celestia turned away from the ponies, as she tried to compose herself. The herd simply remained prostrate before their goddess, not daring to look up.

"I'm sorry," continued Celestia. "I realize you did everything you could. I can't expect you to have fixed everything the way I would have wanted it. I've been selfish these past few years, and Equestria has suffered for it. Without some pony to look up to, they lost their way and started following the dark paths that wind through the hearts of every pony." She again looked down to the ponies. "Please rise."

The ponies stood to gaze upon their goddess in awe. She had returned to them, and even if she sent them away, it was proof enough that she loved Equestria, and all those who lived there. She approached the four ponies with sad smile.

"I've been following you four for a while now," she said. "And what I discovered about all of you is that, you're not perfect. It's actually taught me something about myself. I'm not perfect either. You've fought and complained and whined your way through this ordeal to reach your goal in only the way that friends can. That's why I was able to start seeing you in the first place; you were all destined to become friends. Friendship is the most powerful magic in all of the land, and with it, you can see everything Equestria has to offer. Without it, ponies become like a piece onyx in a field of snow: Dark, cold, and easy to spot." She paused, and narrowed her eyes at a spot behind the ponies. "Just like you, Glaive."

The ponies felt themselves jerked as if on puppet strings, and they fell to the tiled floor as Glaive appeared behind them. He was sweating, but he wore a smile that displayed his sharpened teeth. He stood before the alicorn, ready to finish what he had started all those years ago. He only chuckled.

"Oh, Celestia," he said. "I knew my brother would lead me right to you. I should have guessed that any pony he hung around with had to be a good soul. I'm just glad that you were too busy weeping over your lost little ponies to notice me strolling through your front door."

He snapped his head and flung the ponies to the side with a wave of his

horn. Ridgeline and Bard smashed into a column and fell still. Constance caught her head on the stairs and went down for the count. Heart Chase slammed back first into the wall, but the Knight's armor she had borrowed absorbed most of the impact. She struggled to her hooves as Glaive's horn flared with light. Celestia found herself unexpectedly trapped by his powerful telekinesis.

"I didn't understand what you wanted then, and I don't know what you want now," said Celestia. "The only thing I see in your heart is malice. You used to be a good pony, Glaive. What happened to you? Am I really that offensive?"

"You banished my goddess to the moon because you refused to let her rule," said Glaive. "Nightmare Moon is ten times the goddess you are. She didn't let something as pathetic as friendships determine her power. She sought power within herself, and became everything you're not." He stared into the violet eyes of the princess. "Funny thing about that; she gave me a fragment of her power before we stormed the castle. Just a sliver of the demon mind attached to a piece of star metal to act as insurance if something went wrong. And thanks to your silly little elements, it all did." His smug smile drained into an angry glare. "I will take your body, and with it, I will rule Equestria until she returns to me. It may be a thousand years, but to see her again, it will be worth the wait."

He began to chant, filling the room with dark words that echoed along the marble walls and seeped into the ponies' minds. His horn flared with an olive light that washed all it touched in a sickly green glow. Heart Chase was on her hooves as Glaive stared down the princess. Nightmare Moon's fragment of power had made the Glaive insanely powerful. Celestia stood riveted to the spot as she felt herself fading away from her body and into Glaive's.

A crashing hoof sent the stallion reeling across the marble floor. His concentration broken, the spell failed, and the room fell quiet except for the cursing of the sky blue unicorn. He got to his hooves, and stood beneath the massive stained glass depiction of Luna.

"You BITCH," spat Glaive. His horn flared again as Heart Chase found herself pulled along by puppet strings. Her own bladed feltlock rose to her throat. "You little nag, I should have made sure you were dead the first

time.” He turned to the princess with a grin. “It looks like the magic of friendship isn’t that powerful after all.” Glaive turned his focus back to Heart Chase. The yellow earth mare was now standing in front him. With a swipe of her bladed fetlock, she took Glaive’s horn in a shower of blood that stained the marble walls crimson. As the unicorn reeled backward in pain, she pivoted on the spot and bucked. Her back hooves caught Glaive in the chin, and sent him through the stained glass window behind him.

The stained glass window of Luna shattered as Glaive fell through it. Shards of dark glass rained into the gardens of Canterlot palace where ponies had begun to gather upon seeing the palace door for the first time in five years. With a silent scream, Glaive reached for Heart Chase to take his hoof as he fell into the garden below. Heart Chase only watched as the unicorn toppled through the air.

With nary a sound, Glaive plunged to the ground amid the splinter of bones and the cracking of armor plate. As his vision filled with red, the unicorn looked at those gathered in the garden with his weary yellow eyes. What he saw were not looks of satisfaction, or triumph, but shock and horror, even sadness. There had been so much blood had been spilled today; why were they upset at one more fallen pony? What was another body on the pile? Glaive saw Iron Pick coming from the crowd and kneeling at his side. The unicorn rolled him over and called for a medic.

“W...why...” gurgled Glaive.

“Because we’re ponies,” said Iron Pick. A white coated unicorn waved her horn over Glaive as another wrapped a collar around his neck. “We help each other; even the worst of us. You’re a pony too, Glaive. Even if I hate you, even if I think you’re a monster, Celestia wants us to love you just the same as everypony else.”

Glaive stared into the old unicorn’s dark eyes for a moment. If he still had his horn, he could have easily taken Iron Pick’s body again, but he wouldn’t. He had failed his queen, he had failed the Lunar Rebellion, and most of all, he had failed himself. Glaive closed his eyes, and let the world fade to black around him. The unicorn looked up at pick and shook her head. The butcher of Everfree Castle was gone, never to haunt the nightmares of ponies again.

Above the gardens, Celestia joined Heart Chase as she looked down on the scene below. Heart Chase only shook her head and stepped back to her friends. The other ponies were staggering to their feet; Ridgeline steadied himself on the column.

“How did you do that?” asked Bard as he held his head. “I’ve never seen anyone be able to resist a puppeteering like that. That should be impossible.”

“Yah told me how to beat it the first day we met,” said Heart Chase. “Yah said it only works on ponies with a weak will or who weren’t expectin’ it. Well, I was expectin’ it and the Chases are stubborn as they come.”

She looked around a moment, and realized that they were done. They had set off on a quest to restore the princess to her rightful place at the head of Equestria and here she was in all of her royal glory. Despite the madness, the bickering, and the insanity of it all, their journey had come to a successful end. Four ponies that had been strangers a week ago had banded together as friends to save their princess from the dark heart of Nightmare Moon’s minions.

“Well ponies,” said Heart Chase with a toss of her mane. “I guess we win. Aint’ nothin’ fer us to do but go home now, and let Celestia rule Equestria again.” She looked up to the alicorn. “Yah will take over again, right, yer majesty?”

“I think it’s been too long since I’ve held court,” said Celestia. “You’ve all learned a lesson in friendship here that I couldn’t teach you. Despite all that’s happened, I have my doubts, but I think ponies everywhere need me to be a good example to them. Thank you all for what you’ve done. I think Equestria will be a better place for it.”

Heart Chase remembered something clattering around in satchel. She pulled the sealed tube from her bag, and passed it to Celestia.

“Iron Pick said to give this to you,” she said. “I don’t know what it is, but he said it was important.” Celestia unrolled the scroll and read it a moment before nodding quietly.

“If you will all escort me outside?” she asked the ponies.

Constance, Ridgeline, Bard and heart Chase opened the doors to the garden and stepped out onto the mezzanine ahead of their princess. As the door fluttered open, the ponies that had gathered in the courtyard turned to look upon their princess. Every pony dropped into a bow, and fell silent at the sight of their goddess.

“Ponies of Equestria, hear me,” said Celestia. “On this day in late September, ponies have fought and died for what they believed was right. They fought at the behest of those who wanted power, or those who wanted to take my place; ponies who thought that they knew what was best for Equestria, or at least their own small parts of it. I’m here to tell you that, it’s over. There is to be no more fighting. I think you all realize this now, but I want to make it clear that I am returning on the condition that you realize all ponies are one. Wherever we’re from, whatever race we might be, from alicorns to zebras, we are all ponies, and we need each other to survive. Do not hate your neighbor because he’s different; love him because he has so many things to share with you. I’m asking that you all become better ponies, which is all anyone can ask of you.” She turned to the four ponies that stood in front of her.

“These four ponies are from as different worlds as you can find in Equestria. Yet here they stand united as friends, and do you know why?” She smiled at the four ponies. “Because they are all my children, just as you are. I love all of my little ponies, and I want you to love each other as well.”

The crowd stared in awe at princess as she delivered her message to the ponies. Her speech was exact, the way you might speak to a child. She wasn’t angry with the ponies, just disappointed that it took so long for them to stop hating each other. She turned to the four ponies that stood with her, and asked them to kneel.

“For your dedication to Equestria, and the courage to find friendship even in the heart of darkness, I salute you ponies.” She tapped her horn on each of their shoulders. “I ask you to travel the world to spread the message of love and tolerance that you have learned from each other. You have kneeled as ponies, and now you will rise as my Knights of Friendship.”

The ponies rose to their hooves amid the clapping of a thousand hooves

upon the grounds of the gardens. They looked to each other with smiles, though Ridgeline looked as if he were about to cry with joy. Celsetia looked out to cheering crowd for a moment before speaking again.

“Iron Pick, will you please step forward?”

The ponies all froze as Iron Pick slowly walked toward his princess. He stood for a moment before the alicorn before coming to a bow before her. Heart Chase immediately knew something was wrong when he took off his helm and pushed aside his mane.

“I want you all to look upon Iron Pick,” said Celestia. “This pony thought himself a king because he owned land, and wealth, and resources. Because of his actions, we are all here today to mourn those we have lost in the fighting. All of what has happened can be laid at his hooves. Rightfully, he should be hanged as a traitor, but more bloodshed is not the answer. Please rise.” The unicorn stood, and closed his eyes as he awaited Celestia’s sentence.

“Iron Pick, you and all of your conspirators are hereby banished from Equestria,” she said. “Because you have cause so much pain to so many, you are to leave your families and friends behind, and you may not return to our lands until you have made friends with each and every pony that has plotted against Equestria. You will be taken by boat to the zebra lands where you may start life anew as free ponies. I warn you that if any of you die before you fulfill the conditions of your punishment, your exile will be permanent. I do this to make sure that no pony gets any funny ideas about the terms of exile.”

“I understand,” said Iron Pick. “I thank you for your kindness, your majesty.” Iron Pick turned to surrender himself to the knights that came to take him away. Heart Chase pushed through them to get to her husband.

“What did you say?” she demanded. “What was in that letter?”

“It was a confession,” said Iron Pick. “Everything was my idea, and you were but a pawn in my scheme. You’re free to live your life now; consider it one last gift from me to you.” He kissed the mare’s cheek, and then smiled sadly. “I do love you Heart Chase. You’re such a wonderful mare. I hope I live long enough to see you again.”

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What would have normally been cause for celebration was instead met with somber tones and hard work. Princess Celestia's return had meant that ponies everywhere could believe in her again, but it had come at the cost of thousands of pony lives, and millions upon millions of bits worth of damage to the city of Canterlot. The army of Stalliongrad and the army of Bridleburg had both been put to work repairing homes, building spires, and repaving the streets that had been destroyed in the fighting. Pegasi had been dispatched to Bridleburg to place orders for more stone, and the surrounding areas were abuzz with the industry that comes along with city building. In a matter of weeks, Canterlot would go from a ruined city on the edge of destruction to the thriving capital that once it was. Under Celestia's watchful eye, the city again rose from the cliff sides and into the clouds.

Miles away, Heart Chase, Ridgeline, Bard, and Constance walked along the path through the Everfree forest that had been blazed by the army of Bridleburg. Instead of growing back immediately as it had done in the past few years, the forest instead acted as it should, and stayed cleared. All along the trail to Bridleburg they were met with friendly smiles and heartfelt gifts. Everypony they met thanked them for making Equestria whole again, and everypony brightened their day a little bit more.

They arrived in Bridleburg after days of travel, and found their way to Chase family farms along the roads worn flat by so many generations of Chases. Though it was nearly November, the warmth of the greeting from her family was enough to make it feel like a summer day. The Chases greeted the Knights of Friendship as family, and toasted the return of their prize sister with the fanfare of nobility. In the barn where the Chase family gathered for meals, everypony felt at home again.

With the events of the secession debacle behind them, Red and Quill finally announced their engagement to their families, and in doing so, gave hope to a new era of prosperity not just for Bridleburg, but for Equestria at large. Heart Chase gave her blessings to the union, and assured them that Iron Pick would have done the same. The announcement was met with the same fanfare and joy as Heart's return home and the celebration expanded to include all the blessings and joy that came from the joining of two souls.

Constance's congratulations to Red included a whispered conversation that left her blushing from the professional's wedding night tips.

Heart Chase slipped out of the celebration after introducing Bard and Ridgeline to a few of her eligible cousins. She walked across the lawn, and back to her office where it had all begun only a month and a half ago. As she shuffled through the papers of accounts old and new, she came upon a thumbnail portrait of her father in a locket that she had forgotten about. Staring back from the locket were those familiar blue eyes, and the same confused expression he had always worn. She smiled at the picture, and remembered her days as a child on the farm. There was no political intrigue, no conspiracy. They all got along, and the sisters all loved each other.

There was the click of a closet door behind Heart Chase, and she turned around to find herself face to face with the sad face of her sister. Her mane had been nearly burned off, and her coat was covered in half healed scars from her escape from the burning city hall. Heart Chase expected a world of anger and hatred from the mare, but instead, there was only infinite sadness in her eyes. Apple Chase threw her arms around her sister, and began sobbing.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. "Everything that's happened is my fault. All of our family, our friends, all the ponies in Canterlot. If it hadn't been for my greed, Glaive wouldn't have been able to do anything he did, and we might be royalty now." She continued to bawl in her sister's arms. "I wanted so badly to be a princess that I was willing to sacrifice you to him. I don't know why I thought it would work; he probably would have killed me as soon as I stopped being useful. Please forgive me, Heart Chase. I know I don't deserve it, but I beg of you to take me back as your sister. I won't even stay; I'll just go with the other ponies into exile. Just tell me that you can forgive me, or even try. That's all I want."

Heart Chase looked down at the crying heap that was her sister. True, she nearly killed her, and she had stolen the body of her husband. She had aided the enemy in a bid for power that, if it had succeeded, would have murdered the goddess that most ponies prayed to every day. Yet despite it all, Apple Chase was her sister, and she was a pony. Heart Chase smiled at her sister.

“I forgive yah,” said Heart Chase. “Celestia told us all that she wants us to forget the past and learn to love each other again. I do love yah, and I forgive yah, but yah can’t stay here. You know us Chases. We ain’t too quick to forgive or forget, and I don’t think some of the family would want yah around.” She pushed away her sister’s singed mane. “Yah can’t say you’d really blame them.”

“I really can’t,” said Apple Chase. “But where will I go from here?”

“Yah can come with me and Knights,” said Heart Chase. “We’re supposed to be shippin’ out at the end of the week from Hackney Cove to Hoofswell. Yah can come with us if yah want.” Apple Chase smiled at her sister.

“You really are the best, Heart Chase,” she sniffed. “You’re a much better pony than I could ever be.”

Heart Chase left her sister in the office to return to the celebration. She walked along the side of the barn, quietly thinking about how she would tell her friends that Apple Chase was coming with them when she came to the wide open door. Inside the barn was the happy laughter of family and friends who had come together to celebrate life and the joys of being together. Ridgeline laughed and danced with one of her cousins, while Constance flirted with the stallions, and Bard performed magic tricks for the fillies and colts.

It was in that moment, she finally realized what her cutie mark meant, and how it applied to her special talent. She could see the value in all things. Instead of seeing a prostitute, a coward, and a berserker, she had found instead a caring soul, a dedicated friend, and a true warrior. The three hearts were for the three ponies that would become more than friends; they had become family.

And if Heart Chase knew anything, it was how to love her family.